

THE STIRRUP LATCH

SIDNEY McCALL



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THE STIRRUP LATCH



HE BENT DOWN TO HER HANDS, CATCHING AND
HOLDING THEM.

FRONTISPIECE. *See Page 220.*

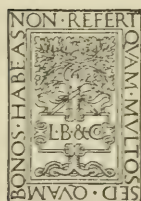
THE STIRRUP LATCH

BY

SIDNEY McCALL

AUTHOR OF "TRUTH DEXTER,"
"THE BREATH OF THE GODS," ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
WILLIAM VAN DRESSER



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1915

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THE STIRRUP LATCH

CHAPTER ONE

"LITTLE SUNSHINE"

"LITTLE SUNSHINE", the home of Mrs. Ciceley Dering, stood, vine-encumbered and shrubbery begirt, in the exact center of a five-acre lot, seven miles out from town.

Three borders of the domain, the front, and the two rearward angles immediately dependent, were guarded by an old-fashioned variety of wooden fencing known as "cat's cradle." Between square posts, erected fully thirty feet apart, were nailed, at top and bottom, wide pine boards; while set in the long rectangle of each space, two similar boards crossing at a long slant gave, indeed, the look of an enormous game of cat's cradle played with white tape, and held not on the chubby fingers of childhood, but rigidly and taut, on unseen, giant hands. Panel after geometric panel stretched to right and left, until, at the far end, each, sharpened by perspective, pointed a mere arrowhead of white.

The fourth side of the enclosure, that to the north,

had long since foregone the distinction of any sort of spacing. It was at the rear of everything, the dwelling faced due south, and it had been used as a reserve fund for the patching of more conspicuous portions. Each depredation had been hastily covered by some sort of a substitute, until by now it was an aggregation of irregular, leaning uprights which held, and were in turn supported by, short spans of warped pickets, bits of wire mesh, and even, in a few ignominious instances, sagging surfaces of rusty tin, hammered flat from old kerosene cans.

Little Sunshine, in common with the other "Fo'h de War" houses still standing in the once aristocratic residence district of Richmond Hill, had known better days. In common also with its neighbors it had managed to retain, along with wistfulness, much of the old-world serenity and charm.

Each quiet sister-home was the nucleus of a broad green environment, so that only the glimpse of a red brick chimney here and there, the sound of a distant piano tinkling softly through listening leaves, or the bright flash, at times, of spontaneous young laughter, told of human propinquity.

It was the proud boast of Richmond Hill that in spite of decline it still tolerated no estate of less than five acres. That was the minimum. Many of the great mansions possessed ten times as many. The weather-beaten homes stood to-day just as the war, now a generation past, had left them. With most, not even a coat of paint had been added. The dwellers in them were, almost without exception, direct descendants of the original builders and owners.

These had been, for the most part, young English and Scotchmen, who nearly a century earlier had come from the old country to the new, not pioneers exactly, and by no means adventurers, but rather alert and far-seeing young business men with already established lines of enterprise in the commodities of cotton, lumber, turpentine, rice, and sugar.

With them were several men of the various "professions", — bankers, lawyers, physicians, and expert accountants. At this time also was introduced the first insurance company known to that part of the world. This was the "Royal", of Liverpool and London. As its ensignia it used an oval bronze plate, perhaps eight inches in height, on which in bas-relief was depicted a mother pelican tearing the flesh from her own breast in order to feed two open-billed and rapacious nestlings. This was by way of visualizing the harrowing condition of a widow left, on an impecunious lord's decease, without the pale of the "Royal's" benefactions. It is only fair to add that in an age both sentimental and chivalrous this concrete presentation of anguish went far toward the company's success.

As each new convert admitted his conversion, and paid in the first installment of his policy, there was attached to his home one of the oval marks of merit. A favorite place for it was directly over the front door, and few were the houses on Richmond Hill that lacked one. By the present generation the old-fashioned tokens had come to be regarded as something between a joke and a good-luck fetich.

Fortunes large for that sociological era were quickly

amassed. Ships loaded with the far-southern products went busily between the harbor of the little town on the gulf, and the big docks at Liverpool. In their home life the exiled ones, obeying an inherent law of all British exiles, proceeded to fashion for themselves not only individual estates, but an entire community which should conserve all usages of the parent civilization. Richmond Hill, at the height of its prosperity, was just a little more English than England.

But those golden days had vanished! The Civil War, like a Medusa's head, froze what it had not otherwise destroyed. The old houses became passive, resigned, almost indifferent. Nature alone knew no cessation; and inch by inch the growing things encroached, moving always nearer to the dwellings, weaving about them a deeper green silence and seclusion.

Once rigid hedges, abandoned to sun and wind and rain, sprang into veritable young forests. Crêpe-myrtle, the fernlike fronds of the mimosa, evergreen gloria-mundi and arbor vitæ, and the star-set shrubs of the gardenia, wrangled and intertwined with self-sown, indigenous, free things, — the wild azalea, high-bush huckleberry, dogwood, red-bay, and occasionally a slender, dominant pine.

These various Sleeping Princess barriers were kept in rude bounds from without by the nibbling of strolling cows, and the more intelligent depredations of "Ole Man Milliken's" large flock of goats, but safe within the patched fences a harlequinade of green bent inward, leaning all one way toward a white pillared dwelling, and the long, waving, polyp

branches, distorted to undue length by eagerness, seemed to say, "Some day, not very far off, now, some day I shall touch you, — you great dumb, disdainful house."

Perhaps because of the man-less condition of Little Sunshine, — Mrs. Dering had been a widow for many years, and her two daughters, though growing into womanhood at a pace which terrified her, had introduced, as yet, no permanent male element, — its surrounding hedge-barrier had become the most lawless and most beautiful of all.

There were places where, in a green, rushing phalanx, it had gained and held a full forty feet into the lawn. Each of the four corners had become a web-footed thicket, where rabbits lived at ease, and every bird known to the far south builded cheerily, feeling its security inviolate. In spite of the pleadings, seldom denied, of little Sylvia, no cats were allowed. After seeing a whole nestful of young mocking birds dragged to earth, tortured, and then lingeringly devoured, Ciceley, with an outburst of self-assertion which amazed her quite as much as it did her daughter, put her small foot down, once and for all, upon the harboring of cats. Kittens were occasionally admitted, and in them Sylvia found an intense, if somewhat uncertain joy, for the kittens at Little Sunshine were subject to a mysterious disappearance, coincident with the first hint of a predatory instinct.

As if to encourage and abet the lovely boldness of her special hedge, Ciceley had, with her own hands, set all along the inner border innumerable vines of that most beautiful of all wild flowers, the yellow

jessamine. Each had been brought in tenderly, not without whispered apology and explanation, from the "woods." Not one of them had been ungenerous enough to die. Indeed it was a saying on the Hill that Ciceley could transplant anything, from a live oak to an old broom handle, and it would immediately send forth new and joyous shoots. It gave the possessor a secret but intense satisfaction to know that she had, among growing things, the lucky hand. Perhaps the gift was hers by way of compensation, for in many other respects, Ciceley could not regard herself as being altogether fortunate.

In her garden, at least, she could know herself to be a dispenser of beauty and of joy. The name of the place, Little Sunshine, had from the first given her a cue for the amassing of a preponderance of golden flowers. Yellow chrysanthemums in their time, marigolds, daffodils, great trumpet narcissus, all species of yellow roses, gladioli, and iris, and, in the late autumn, a veritable Danaë shower of the orange Klondyke cosmos, kept the bright designation visible in a calendar of bloom.

What more suitable, then, that the entire small estate should, for at least a few weeks in each year, be enclosed in a continuous golden filagree, a living mesh of sunlight colored flowers? When each spring the yellow jessamines were in their glory, Ciceley felt herself a queen. Even the sedate and more commonplace neighbors who had remonstrated with her for "bringing in all those weeds", came now to gaze and marvel at the accomplished result. The entire hedge-top, — if a wavering lush growth reaching thirty

feet into the air can still be called a hedge, — became now a continuous scarf of golden mist, sprinkled with topaz and with stars. The perfume, flowing inward, hung over the house like incense over an altar.

At such times Ciceley, unable to resist the double lure of beauty and odor, would steal from the house, laying aside guiltily some bit of sewing, and begin a luxurious, deliberate walk about the enclosure. Now she would gaze upward to the flowers, now slowly around, almost incredulous still of the miracle she had helped to bring about. Then, without warning, some too poignant stab of loveliness would sting her quickly-lowered eyelids into tears.

In her girlhood she had read much poetry. This in common with other personal delights had been long foregone, but fragments of it now, very clearly memorized, not always entirely relevant, reached forward from the past, to disturb and quicken her. She thought of Wordsworth's belief that each flower enjoys the air it breathes. She felt the thrill of his dancing daffodils. In a certain sense, her beautiful, wild jessamines were a field of aërial daffodils. Then for no clear reason she thought of music, likened to the yearning of a "god in pain." Why must great beauty so often bring that sense of yearning? For this she had no answer. There was nothing in her narrow, religious upbringing to solve such questions. To all other such spiritual searching she had been given the answer that there was much we human creatures were not supposed to understand.

So this also she made no attempt to "understand", only she felt dimly, with what was left of her child-

hood's faith, that Heaven must be a great, golden moor, entirely surrounded with jessamines that did not cause your heart to ache.

After all, the beauty and the sadness of the spring blossoming were transient phases. For most of the year, Ciceley's life passed in a succession of small duties and adaptations. Her permanent spiritual attitude was one of resignation. Not for a single day did Ciceley fail to assure herself and her Maker that the loss of Henry Dering, five years after marriage, had been a tangible cross laid upon her slender shoulders, a burden which, as a devoted wife and mother, it became her life-long obligation to bear.

That an all-wise Providence might have had, in the removal of Henry, any purpose aside from the chastening of Henry's widow, was a thought that could never have been hers. She had from the first accepted it as a personal "dispensation", a bereavement which unconsciously had grown into a habit, and which she wore much as she did the unbecoming arrangement of her hair.

When the last jessamine-star had fallen, and the sudden up-rush of pointed foliage leaves on the twisted, porphyry-colored stems mounted in small twin flames, then the hedge became an intricate network as of jade and malachite. Portions of it became literally impenetrable. And now, anew, the elderly matrons of the neighborhood, — most of these had known Ciceley Taliaferro in her cradle, — reiterated protests against "the way that Dering jungle was being allowed to overrun the place."

"In *my* opinion," declared old Mrs. Rogers, her

Victorian bonnet, slightly over one ear, emitting jet sparkles of disapproval, "it is getting to be positively indecent. Whenever I enter one of the Dering gates, even the big front one, I hold my petticoats and my breath in terror lest a serpent should rush out and assail my l——, er —" she checked herself with a little cough, "that is, my ankles."

The cough and apology were by way of deference to the unwed condition of one of her auditors. This was Miss Delia Turrentine, the youngest and most frivolous of three ancient virgins who still maintained existence, — no one knew precisely how, — in the stately old Turrentine homestead.

"But it's so pretty and so green and — somehow — so *happy-looking*," Ciceley had demurred when, half an hour later, Delia, on her way home, had stopped in at Little Sunshine for the purpose of imparting the full flavor of Mrs. Rogers's discontent.

"Y-e-es," admitted Delia, striving to be polite. She, like the elder dame, retained a biblical terror of snakes. Then, in a sudden rush of generosity, "Anyway, the paths leading from the gates are clear, and there are lots of gates."

Ciceley brightened. "Yes, aren't there? Lots of them! Let's see!" Here the slim, needle-pricked fingers came into play. "One — two — three — five in all. Why, I hadn't realized there were quite so many! Of course," she amended, dropping a little of the ardor of her tone, "that west one, leading out into Cedar Grove, is all wired up. We had to do it, to keep out old Mrs. Thompson's red cow."

Delia nodded sympathetically. She and her sis-

ters knew the ways of that maurauding and intelligent beast. "It seems a kind o' pity," she mused, staring from the wide verandah where they were seated down toward the now hidden front entrance, "that all our gates couldn't have stirrup latches. They keep anything out."

Ciceley gave a little cry and a quick gesture of dissent. "Oh, no! There *couldn't* be another stirrup latch. There's only one, and it belongs right there. Why," she explained, but more shyly, being overcome by a consciousness of her own unnecessary vehemence, "Jim says that the stirrup latch is our sanctuary-knocker and tuning-fork in one."

Recalling the words and the speaker, Ciceley threw back her head, laughing softly. She seldom laughed aloud, and when she did there was something intangibly incongruous in the sound, as if a little brown hen on her prescribed nest should suddenly give forth the notes of a wood thrush.

Delia betrayed a spontaneous access of rigidity. She glanced sharply sideways, at her companion. But Ciceley, still gazing toward the distant gate, failed to perceive.

"Colonel Jim ought to know, I reckon," said Delia meaningly.

This too passed Ciceley by. Her thoughts had turned into their habitual channel. "Those naughty girls of mine," she began, "have taken to running to the front windows every time the latch falls. Of course I laugh at them, but somehow" — here a worried look drifted across her eager face — "it doesn't seem quite nice of them."

She paused on a note of interrogation. Her gaze, now seeking Delia's, held a shy pleading. It was as if she challenged and implored the other to assert that anything done by such girls could fail to be "nice."

Delia, meeting the brown eyes, withdrew her own as if they had been cold finger tips. "Well," she remarked, getting to her feet, "I reckon I must be running along home now. The girls not in?"

Ciceley, half-unconsciously, had risen also, and she now descended the wide front steps with Delia. It was quite the correct thing, on Richmond Hill, to accompany a caller to the front gate.

"No," she said, in answer to the question, "they have been away all day — on a launch-party. I hate to let them take these water-trips. I never have an easy moment until they are safe at home again."

Delia made no comment. In silence the two walked down the center of the long, curving driveway. Fountain-shaped bushes of bridal wreath and syringa bent over it. Now and again Ciceley paused to put aside some specially long, encroaching spray. Her manner in doing this had a subtle quality of intimacy. A shrewd observer would have seen at a glance that she was much nearer in kinship to the graceful shrub than to Miss Delia.

Within a few paces of the gate the ladies instinctively paused, and stood regarding it with a heightened interest. Each of the four other entrances, including the wired-up western gate, mathematically centered a long fence line; but this, the main one,

cut across the southeast corner, severing it as cleanly as a knife cuts into a wedge of cheese.

Between massive, square pillars of brick, from which the last flake of the original cement coating had fallen, swung two panels formed of horizontal bars of oak, quite widely spaced. Across each panel ran a thin crescent of black, slave-wrought iron, the points bent abruptly into hinges that worked in heavy staples, mortised deep into the old brick piers.

At the gate center, where the opposing crescent backs nearly met, rose, several inches above the level of the top bar, what seemed to be a wooden post, terminating in a sharp point. On opening the gate, however, this resolved itself into complementary halves, and over these converging tips was placed the famous stirrup latch.

Hung at the angle of one division, it was thrown backward to a bar in opening, and forward over the adjacent half-post in closing, meeting the bar beyond. In either case it struck upon an iron boss, round and squat as a stemless mushroom. The sound thus made was peculiarly clear, sharp, and unforgettable. It was claimed on the Hill that in a windless atmosphere, and especially at night when the dew gave a tinge of moisture, it could be heard and recognized fully a mile away.

To all intents and purposes it was exactly what "Colonel Jim" had called it, a sanctuary knocker, with the sole difference of being used horizontally instead of at the usual perpendicular.

Delia's scrutiny did not last long, nor did it engender comment. With the wiry alertness which char-

acterized all her movements she stepped forward. Ciceley, murmuring some commonplace regret that her guest must depart so soon, reached the gate before her, and held the old stirrup upright.

When Delia had passed through, Ciceley slowly rejoined the panels, and laid the latch upon its ancient boss. No sound was made. A setter dog across the street would not have twitched an ear. Ciceley's eyes continued to watch the slight, nervous figure as it hurried down a vista overhung with the dark, earth-seeking branches of old juniper trees. There was something pathetic in its very energy. What reason had Delia to be energetic? The watcher could not help contrasting her own full life with this emptiness. Even her great bereavement showed as a precious possession. Delia had nothing, not even memories!

This was by no means the first time she had saddened with the vicarious loneliness of Delia's arid existence. Usually it had been a passing phase, easily loosed; but now, for what reason she could not say, it deepened, and was drawing irresistibly near. From somewhere out of the golden afternoon it had gathered. Now it enclosed her softly, a thin, chill cloud. She shivered, and leaned more heavily against the gate. Of course it was merely sympathy for Delia. What else could it be? Her own life was crowned, sanctified, by the glory of motherhood! She was dissolved in it, merged into it, as an Eastern Yogi enters his golden lotos reverie.

From out of the impalpable mist the remembered echoes of nearer and grosser voices came. Her

friends and neighbors, many of them, as she knew, most tender in their usual thoughts of her, had been saying that she had not taken the wisest course with her daughters, that she was "spoiling" them. Mrs. Rogers, the most outspoken of all, had asserted to Ciceley's face that unselfishness, carried to extremes, might become a form of self-indulgence. Old Mammy Nycie was relentless in criticism. "You gits no thanks fum chillun by lettin' 'em tromple you in de dust!"

Always before she had been able to smile at the well-meant admonitions and, with little effort, keep the memory of them at bay. Old Mrs. Rogers was childless. Mammy's concern was evidently a mere exaggeration of devotion to her first nursling, — Ciceley herself. What could these two, or, in fact, any of the other carpers know of the peculiar, wonderful, engrossing love that bound a widow to her fatherless children?

But what, on the other hand, if there should be some acid touch of truth in what was said? Lucille, especially of late, had seemed at times to ignore her. When she did speak, it was invariably upon some slight, domestic matter in which she demanded service. Lucille had always been a difficult child to understand. Perhaps it was only natural that as she reached young womanhood the strangeness and reserve should deepen. Her very beauty, which in the eyes of others than the worshipping mother had become practically flawless, had the effect of withdrawing her from common interests.

And the other one, little Sylvia, — that thing of

perfume, laughter, blowing tendrils, dimples, and childish sweetness, — was the little one entirely unchanged?

Here the stab of pain was a thing so tangible that Ciceley uttered a cry, and pressed both hands against her heart, where the stab was planted. This was a possibility that she was literally unable to meet. She was one who reasoned, not with her intellect, but with her emotions.

There was an instant of fluttering inner protest, then, with the instinct of a mother-bird instantly rebuilding a demolished nest, her thoughts flew here and there, picking up shreds of excuse for Sylvia. She was too young to realize that sometimes she was just a little inconsiderate. Every day she came, apparently, more definitely under the influence of her sister. After all, Lucille was the problem. If only Lucille —

But this twig would not carry. Over its broken ends the mother-bird stood still. For the moment, even the incentive to rebuild was checked.

She opened her eyes wide, as one emerging from an unhappy dream, and, as if in search of some definite, external hope, looked slowly about. Near her, and as far as her senses could reach, was unbroken green silence. The hedge tree-tops that nearly met above her head were as motionless as the old brick pillars. From somewhere among the crowding stems near the earth, a wood thrush fluted introspectively. The soft, monotonous, minor notes touched her as a soft hand brushes the strings of a harp. She caught her underlip between her teeth, to check a rush of

tears. And, yet, as she told herself doggedly, she, of all people, had little cause for tears.

Through the glimmer she felt, rather than saw, a little flicker of visible life at her elbow. On one of the horizontal bars of the gate, a tiny green lizard, already beginning to turn brown from contact with the unpainted wood, had started out of the jungle toward her. As she looked, it came to an apprehensive pause, thought better of it, and then deliberately regarding her out of its diamond slits of eyes, threw back its chinless head, and from the place where a chin belongs, produced, as by necromancy, a shining half-circle of crimson tissue.

At sight of the absurd little creature, something in Ciceley suddenly relaxed. She liked all lizards, not only because of their useful habit of eating insects, but for themselves. She recalled now, with a smile, how one day many, many years ago, little Sylvia, then a mere baby, after witnessing such a performance had hurried back to the house and, catching up a beloved, small gray kitten, conjured, lispingly, "Puthy, puthy, show me *your* blanket out!"

Still smiling, she held out an ingratiating forefinger. The tip of it was peppered with needle-pricks. To one of them a small clot of blood still adhered, for Miss Delia had called her down-stairs from the sewing-room. The lizard was forgotten. Ciceley's one thought now was of the unfinished party dress, promised to Lucille for that very evening. "How stupid I am. How could I have forgotten," she murmured, and, without a backward glance, turned and fled in the direction of her sewing-machine.

The lizard, thus abandoned, swallowed his miracle in a series of indignant gulps, and having by this time become exactly the colorless color of the weather-beaten oak, flattened himself luxuriously upon it for a sun bath.

CHAPTER TWO

COLONEL JIM

IN all residence communities of long standing, there obtains a hint of the primitive and tribal, demonstrated by the tacit acceptance of a chief, a sort of modern "ealdorman", in other words, a leading citizen. There is invariably a Big House, bigger than all others, and in it a man or woman who remains in the foreground of the general mind.

On Richmond Hill this dominant being, though he himself would have been the last to admit it, was James Roy, universally called "Colonel Jim." He was sole dweller in the enormous mansion originally known as "Roycroft", but since termed by its solitary inhabitant, "Stag Harbor." Architecturally it was the Hill's most notable relic of antebellum splendor, with a row of lofty, fluted columns supporting so massive a pediment that one was vaguely reminded of the Parthenon.

The driveway, exactly a quarter of a mile in length, was an avenue of spreading live oaks, set, at the time of planting, more than two hundred feet apart. Under the oaks, well forward, ran continuous lines of azalea bushes. No pruning shears had ever touched

them. The upper branches, commingling, sprang to a height of at least fifteen feet, while at the bordering sides, as if in recognition of their office, they had maintained two parallel lines of verdant rectitude. Being by nature lovers of shade, they continued to flourish, even though all other forms of undergrowth had gradually disappeared.

Above them the live oaks made a leafy tunnel, suffused with chill, green light; and in the early spring, just when Ciceley's yellow jessamines were throwing their golden noose, Colonel Jim's azaleas gave forth a cry of answering rapture. They were all of one color, the deep, pulsating rose of a water-melon's heart, freshly cut.

In blossom time "town" picnics were an everyday occurrence. To them the Colonel threw wide, not only his gates, but literally all the doors of his great, empty home, delighting to hear within the echo of young voices and the laughter of children. The show-room of the place was a semicircular ballroom jutting out at the back, just where the Hill began its long slope southward to the edge of Rag Swamp. This province, as its name implies, was a dismal and mysterious one, given over to mud, tiny lagoons, mosquitoes, and, presumably, to alligators.

No one, not even the splendid old Englishman who had been Jim's father, knew exactly how many acres rightfully belonged to him. The frontal boundary of Stag Harbor, with its huge iron entrance gate, and the little English lodge set cunningly within it, just to the left, was clearly enough defined.

Past it ran the main road leading out from town. This, lifting over the apex of the Hill, lost itself in a vague, increasingly distant territory of red clay and pine "timberlands." This road, paved to a dazzling whiteness with crushed shell, had once known only the rhythmic beat of the hoofs of high-stepping horses. Now it was desecrated by a clanging tramway.

The right border of Stag Harbor was as definitely if not as noisily conserved by a second thoroughfare, a "county" road, branching at right angles to the car tracks.

To the left, somewhere among crowding pine-trunks, there was known to be a cheaply constructed wire fence erected, under protest, by Colonel Jim, through the menace of a newly arrived "Land Promoting Company."

This energetic organization, the first of the sort to reach the quiet Southern town, had suddenly appeared from nowhere. Rumor told of Western millions backing it. Showy offices were opened on the main business street, and for a while the air resounded to alarming prophecies of a boom.

Not content with distracting an entire city, the "hustlers", as they termed themselves, cast malevolent eyes of progress upon the sacred "Hill." Impassioned pamphlets declared that within a year this "salubrious residence district" would see itself subdivided into small building lots. The car-fare from town was to be reduced from ten to five cents, thus allowing the working classes access to a more favored locality.

Sprightly young civil engineers, conversing with one another in a queer, nasal dialect in which the chief letter appeared to be "r", set up their tripods, and trailed long reels of metal tape through the outraged forests. Old court-house records were unearthed, and property rights, which until now had seemed to their owners as secure as their personal skins, were openly attacked.

Colonel Jim, very red as to face and inflated as to diaphragm, had been forced to listen while a glib youth in a checked waistcoat pointed out the fact that his western boundary line was in jeopardy, and that the one way in which his interests could be protected was by coöperating with the Company and putting up a fence.

At first the Hill was aghast. It shuddered to its aristocratic marrow at the very thought of these vulgar iconoclasts. Several indignation meetings were held. Their first triumph was in a printed announcement from the president of the Tramway Company that the fare should not be reduced. There was nothing the Hill wished less than to be arbitrarily "promoted."

After the initial tremor, it began slowly, but with increasing satisfaction, to realize that no further active opposition was needed. All it had to do was to wait. Since this negative process was already habitual, the Hill drew a long sigh, folded its hands in its shabby silken lap, and — waited.

Little by little the clamor of progress died away. Promoters and civil engineers blew from their stalks, like the filaments from seeding dandelions. The Colonel's cheap wire fence, now sagging mournfully

between ill-planted juniper posts, served as a trellis for yellow jessamines, and the bright, thorny evergreen of the wild Cherokee rose.

This had all happened ten years before. Several other syndicates had ravaged the little town, but none of them had ventured to the Hill.

Being thus legally bounded at three points of the compass, Stag Harbor still possessed, toward the south, an indeterminate region leading down a long, sun-warmed slope to the very edge of the swamp. The fact that no promoter, however zealous, had ever suggested the pacing off of its oozy floor, endeared it to Jim anew. Its flat front, made up of water-fed trees all of one height, — cypress, palmetto, bays, and blue gums, — became to him a wall that shut out the horrors of Yankee enterprise. The long gray-beard moss among the branches waved a sort of mournful warning. Jim felt that he loved even the water moccasin and legendary alligators for their part in keeping the intruder away.

Besides Stag Harbor, Jim had received other inheritances. Down in the town, which was slowly growing in spite of all efforts of the older citizens to prevent, he had docks, and stores, and a few dwellings. Also had come to him a cotton business, far gone in decrepitude.

For the rental-paying property he was openly glad. An agent relieved him of all the disagreeable exigencies. Had Colonel Jim elected to be his own manager, it is safe to assert that his tenants would have remained in possession, irrespective of their ability to pay monthly dues, for Jim was essentially of that

order of social enemy known as "kind-hearted." He was the sort of man who could not easily say no. However true this lamentable fact with regard to others, it is certain that in his personal affairs he could use the negative with vigor. After a few days of puzzled bending over his dead father's desk, Jim suddenly sprang up, shouted aloud, much to the consternation of his two clerks, "Nothin' doing!" rushed across the street to the Battle House bar, and, being thus fortified, sought out his lawyer, to whom he gave peremptory instructions to "sell out the darned, moth-eaten old business for what it would bring!"

From that decisive moment onward, Jim proclaimed himself to be a farmer. What it was he hoped to farm on the arid clay and sand of the Stag Harbor acres neither he or anyone else quite knew. That inspiration was to come.

At that time, also, the title of "Colonel," which was to cling to him through the latter part of his life, had not been acquired. The Spanish War, and his own gallantry therein, had yet to bestow it. He was known in these earlier years, as simply "Jim." Among the younger generation he was called indiscriminately "Cousin" or "Uncle" Jim, with little regard to actual consanguinity. He was one of those wholesome, ozone-exuding people, whose very presence compels the softening of a mere baptismal or hereditary name. Had any one of his associates referred to him as "Mr. James Roy", it must have been by way of an immense joke.

But there was another reason for Jim's great popularity. Sentiment is rooted deep in the human

heart, and the old saying "All the world loves a lover" is a poignant phase of it. Since Jim's boyhood, his devotion to Ciceley Taliaferro had been unswerving and unconcealed. That it had proved hopeless only made it the more secure. An ideal, once fixed, has already achieved immutability.

During the days of their very happy childhood, when Jim had been the recognized leader among the big boys, and Ciceley never a leader of anything, but rather a shy, dependent follower upon bolder spirits, she had been singled out for his especial charge. No jeers, nor ridicule, no scornful protests, "Aw, Jim, come on! Don't stop to help a kid over the fence!" had the slightest influence upon him. Whenever a fence or a tree was to be climbed, little Ciceley was sure to find Jim's outstretched hand. That the hand was invariably dirty made no difference to either. The first chinquepins of the season were always hers. Jim knew just where to find them. These she would string into a long rosary, terminating in a chinquepin cross formed by the help of a hairpin.

Ciceley loved the time to come when she could fashion and wear a new chinquepin necklace. She would lift the cross, and, gazing at it, feel a strange stirring of religious sentiment. She almost wished she had not been born "Piscerpalean", to which creed nuns were an abhorrence. It must be wonderful, thought little Ciceley, to be a cloistered nun, spending one's hours in a religious ecstasy.

But always, within a few days of acquiring the new rosary, the beads, one by one, would be eaten. Ciceley loved the keen, sweet savor of the nuts. Besides,

if one kept them too long on the string, horrid worms were certain to appear. So, by degrees, the necklet and finally the cross would be devoured, and for that season the vague longing for devotional seclusion would pass away.

As Ciceley grew from childhood into young maidenhood, there came upon her, in Jim's presence, an unconquerable shyness. She still depended upon him; still received at his hands all the fresh beauties of the forest; still she liked him to be near, and yet, at his approach, she shrank, and a tremor of virginal fear shook her.

Jim, utterly untroubled by psychic fantasies, loved the wide, startled look in her brown eyes. Somehow it seemed to make of him a conqueror. Each day she grew more lovely and more desirable. Their future life together was, for him, a thing pre-ordained. He could not conceive of his soul's existence as apart from her.

Then, early in one summer, Ciceley being just seventeen and recently graduated from the leading girls' seminary in the town, Jim's cousin, Henry Dering, also fresh from school, or rather "The University", where for two years of absence he had been understood to be studying law, — this young hero, dapper, self-confident, and quite obviously superior, made sudden reëntry into the rose-jar scented parlors of the Hill.

Henry focussed, at once, in his exotic person, the social interest of the community. All the women voted him approval: the men, that is the older men, were noticeably reserved.

The boy was very good-looking, in a finished, slim, blond way. His mother proudly declared him to be a perfect specimen of British aristocracy. His attire, an exaggeration of all the latest male fashions, would have convulsed a Broadway vaudeville audience, but on Richmond Hill, where the very term "vaudeville" was unknown, the appalling ensemble was accepted without question as "the thing!"

The other boys, all but one, instantly essayed timid semblance. Scarlet neckties blossomed on various rose-embowered verandahs; and cigarettes, heretofore gallantly dispensed with in the presence of ladies, rivalled, in their fitful glow, the antics of summer fireflies.

Something about this slavish adaptation infuriated Jim. His dull anger was the more persistent because of his inability to state, even to himself, the exact cause of it. In all crises of his life, beginning with this disastrous summer, it was Jim's misfortune to remain inarticulate. Now, with his very spine bristling at sight of Henry's swaggering gait and reverberating garments, he found no outlet except in the muttered words, "Sissy! Dude, and darned fool!"

Jim too was blond; but the sun and wind that he loved had tanned him to the hue of his native clay hills. His mouse-colored hair, under the ministrations of local barbers, had a fashion of sticking out in unexpected points. He had grown too rapidly, acquiring, with the sudden access in height, that broad-shouldered, long-armed awkwardness which develops later into splendid strength. In a vague,

boyish way, he was conscious of regarding himself as being ugly, but this fact acquired real significance only after Henry's return.

This hero, having enjoyed an interval of general homage, languidly bestirred himself to more personal aims. There was nothing concealed about Henry's mental processes. One glorious afternoon when the Hill boys were congregated, after the immemorial custom of rural males, at the village store, Henry quite suddenly announced his intention of "looking over" the girls. The statement provoked an outburst of admiring laughter. Henry was a devil and no mistake! Big Jim alone went a murderous red. He opened his lips, and, finding that he had nothing to say, shut them to a livid, twitching bar of disapproval. One of the younger boys, catching sight of him, foolishly piped up: "You'd better keep yo' hands off Sis Taliaferro. She's Jim's girl!"

All eyes now turned to him. He dared not meet them. Lowering his head between quivering shoulders, he plunged away from his tormentors in the direction of home, but not quickly enough to escape Henry's high-voiced taunt. "Jim! Why, old Jim Roy wouldn't know a girl from his grandmother!"

At a candy-pulling party that very evening, the admired one, with serene deliberation, lifted his perfumed handkerchief, and being assured, by a swift comprehensive glance, that Jim was watching, dropped it at Ciceley's feet.

From that hideous moment, Jim felt he was lost, and by the self-admission inevitably hastened defeat. For a while, with the instinct of fair play which had

always been a characteristic, he tried to be just, to put himself in his cousin's place. After all, as he told himself, it was inconceivable that Henry or any one else should be able to care for another girl while Ciceley was near.

She was unbound, unrestrained as to choice. He himself had never made love to her, at least in the way that Henry evidently conceived it. She was still so young, so innocent, so childishy immature. Before the wide purity of her look, the very thought had seemed desecration, and yet here was Henry not only seeking her out, but committing the blasphemy of stating his hopes and intentions in public.

Perhaps until this dreadful awakening Jim had not realized how completely he loved, had loved, and always must love her. That she really was his had been taken for granted. It still seemed as if such a bond, though unspoken, must be liable for both.

Then one day at a picnic near the old Rogers's Mill, a favorite spot for such gatherings, all at once, from the menacing cloud of his boyish forebodings, the lightning of certainty struck him down.

He had turned from the others, goaded to forest retreat by the open persistence of Henry. One more amorous ogle, with the response of Ciceley's pleased laugh, one more touch, even conventionalized by the game they were playing, of Henry's ringed hand on the girl's, Jim felt would incite him to murder.

With his dog at his heels, he had followed the clear running creek, and finally, spent with his anger, flung himself down on a bank. The dog promptly stretched himself near, for a nap. The boy, though

most wretchedly alert in his mind, was as still. Intent on his thoughts, he failed to hear the approach of two figures, and sent his startled glance upward just in time to see their lips meet.

With a groan, his head went to earth. He shut his eyes tightly, as if to crush out the vision. He wished that the waters would rise and submerge him for ever. Now he pressed his hands close on his ears, and lay stark, cursing fate.

When he ventured again to look up, they were gone. He was never to know whether Henry had seen him. After this, the picnic moved on without Jim.

At home, in his room, frenzied plans were in progress. He was roused to the combat at last. He would fight for his own. If Ciceley really loved Henry — and she must, to have given that kiss — his own hopes were already ashes; and yet, from no lips but Ciceley's the remorseless and final "thumb down", must be given.

He waited to find her alone. This befell the next day in her garden. She had always delighted in flowers: and from childhood had been given a small fertile spot where she planted, and sowed, and reaped at her will. This year, for some reason already grown misty, she had chosen for dominance small clove pinks. It was midsummer when the goaded and reckless boy Jim attempted the taking of happiness by storm. She was kneeling, her hand on a flower, but at his sudden appearance, she sprang to her feet, with the bloom snapped off short. For many years after, Jim would turn from a path where a clove pink was growing.

Poor Jim had no finesse. His gestures and stammering, fierce words roused, at once, all her latent defiance. Yes, she loved Henry, she told him. Her eyes were bright with excitement, and her look almost hard. That day she had promised to marry him, just as soon as it could be arranged.

Again Jim, like some wounded animal, sought out the still forest. His blind, stumbling feet led him unconsciously to the knoll by the stream, where his death-blow had fallen.

It was here, hours later, that a friend found him out. A voice low and compassionate breathed to the half-hidden ear, "Jim, Jim! Dear old Jim. It's your chum, Julia Wickford. It's Jule."

CHAPTER THREE

JULIA

IF, among the boys of his generation, Jim Roy was securely dominant, the Hill girls had possessed also among themselves a personal leader.

This was a girl of Jim's own age, a cousin to Ciceley, Julia Wickford, familiarly known as "Jule." Most of the young people of the Hill were cousins, once, twice, or thrice removed. That a line of demarcation still held between the several branches of Taliaferros and Roys was looked upon as something of a social paradox.

At this time all post-bellum aristocrats were wretchedly poor. It would have argued disloyalty to the "lost cause" had their condition been otherwise. But even with them there were degrees of penury, and it had been whispered that for a few years the Wickfords had entered the limbo of utter destitution.

Stephen Wickford, though a bridegroom of but a few weeks, had been among the first to enlist. From the disastrous struggle he returned, lacking not only an arm, but all hope, incentive, or power of readjustment. Shortly after the war the beautiful Wickford

homestead was burned. Its owners always declared and believed this final tragedy to be the work of revengeful incendiary negroes.

A few unrelated pieces of furniture were saved, and conveyed by the rescuers into the detached kitchen building which fortunately had stood at quite a distance from the main residence. Vaguely, like ghosts not clearly realized, or cloud-wraiths bending toward a current of warm air, the bewildered couple drifted in the wake of the furniture, and, being neither alive nor quite yet dead, kept up, in the old brick building, a sort of travesty of existence. But for the tenderness and compassion of their friends, it is certain that at this time the Wickfords would have starved to death.

A little later the office of postmaster to the small community was secured for Mr. Wickford. To be more accurate, it was created for him. He took it apathetically. In his embittered heart what he wanted most of all was to be let alone. The starving of his maimed body seemed, in his eyes, a trivial addition to the sum of already accumulated misfortunes. For his wife's sake he meekly undertook the duties of his new position. The small salary it brought proved ample for their diminished needs.

Then, to the astonishment and delight of all, a boy-child somehow found his way into their arid lives. That patient, uncomplaining ghost, the mother, was transformed into a vital, throbbing, human being. The boy became her idol, her *élan vital*. From his rosy warmth she drank, as from a spring, the elixir of rejuvenation.

When two years afterward a girl was born, there remained little for her but the husks of maternal ecstasy. There had been but a single box of precious ointment, and it was squandered.

As the two children grew, Mrs. Wickford, abject before the idol of her firstborn, apparently made no effort to conceal her preference. The very look in her eyes when feasting upon his sturdy comeliness changed at the little Julia's approach into a sort of patient kindness.

Children, of course, do not reason; but their hearts have antennæ more sensitive than those of any night-moth. Julia learned to keep to herself. But for the stereotyped mother-duties at table and at bedtime, she made no demands. She played alone in the white sand under the oak-trees, fashioning herself dolls from short-stemmed flowers, and fairy furniture from twigs, the plastic red clay, leaves, and moss.

Sometimes, after breakfast, the wistful little figure would follow Mr. Wickford to the gate through which it passed so seldom. One morning — and the daring of this initial venture was never to be forgotten — she reached up and caught him by the arm.

"Daddy, I wish you would take me with you. It's so lonesome here."

"Lonesome!" the man repeated, in vague surprise. "Why? — Won't your brother play with you?"

"He never will," Julia said rather breathlessly. "He is always over in the Stuart lot with some other boys — or else —"

The words were choked by a little sob. Something in the man's dulled senses stirred.

"Mother —" she began again.

"All right — come on with me," said Wickford, hurrying forward as if to escape the sight of the upturned face. "I reckon your mother won't care," he added, by way of concession to the higher authority.

"Oh, no. Mother won't even know I'm gone."

An instant later, with the old gate safely closed, and a dew-sweet world spreading before her, the sober restraint of the usual was tossed aside like an elf's brown cloak. She darted from one side of the road to the other, catching up sylvan treasures, only to toss them aside at a fresh revelation. Now with outstretched, empty hands, and the mane of her thick no-colored hair streaming flat in the wind, she would rush suddenly forward to what seemed, in her childish eyes, an incredible and heart-catching distance, and then, wheeling, fly back in a glorious panic to cling to, and drag upon, the hand of her new-found friend, her Daddy.

After this, as a matter of course, she went with him. Mrs. Wickford made no protest. Julia was still too young to be of assistance about the house.

The small, shabby, post-office building, with its meager vestibule and the one pine-boarded room where Mr. Wickford sat, tilted back in a kitchen chair, perpetually self-hypnotized into a sort of defensive apathy, became the child's real habitat.

Her alphabet was acquired from the printed labels on newspapers. Soon she had advanced to a sight-reading of various letter addresses. It was a day of never-to-be-forgotten pride and importance when,

unassisted, she was allowed to reach up into old Mr. Warriner's box, extract a letter and a pamphlet, and somewhat tremulously thrust them toward him through the small oval window cut with miraculous precision in the square pane of unwashed glass.

The old man started in surprise. His mail was moving toward him apparently of its own volition, for Julia's hand and arm remained hidden. He crinkled his eyes to peer through the window toward that level where he was accustomed to meet Mr. Wickford's somewhat irresolute gaze. Nothing was to be seen. Then, all at once he became aware of a pair of steady, childish eyes, wide opened and fixed upon his own, that appeared just above the level of the small wooden shelf within.

"God bless my soul!" cried old Mr. Warriner. "If it isn't little Jule Wickford, turned postmistress!"

He took his letters with the deep bow of an ancient courtier, and thanked the child gravely, but as he turned away he was chuckling. To each chance-met acquaintance the episode was retailed. Before nightfall the entire community had assured itself that "Wickford had a mighty smart little girl." "Shouldn't be a bit surprised," avowed one appreciative listener, "if she turned out to be worth all the rest of the Wickfords put together. That brother of hers is a young ruffian!"

Now daily the "smart little girl" was allowed to pass out letters through the magic aperture. It became to her literally the casement bearing out upon a different and a brighter universe. Smiles, jokes, and commendatory remarks came to her.

Soon she felt a deep and childish conviction that it was her special window, her post-office, her Hill, and above all, her own Daddy.

Home life in the old brick kitchen became less and less of a reality. She ate and slept there with as little sense of belonging as a young business man feels toward his hall bedroom in an uncongenial boarding house.

During the long pauses between the delivery of letters, she studied. Old Mr. Warriner brought her a battered primer that had belonged to his daughter, now a married woman in New York. Another friend supplemented the gift by one of a first reader, illustrated with old English woodcuts. All visitors to the post-office were eager to question and to assist her. Finally the lethargic father was himself aroused, and in a more gradual way the little Julia began to do for him what the birth of a son had done for Mrs. Wickford.

But tragedy was again nearing the unconscious mother. The other ladies of the Hill felt an increasing indignation at the way that Julia, however intelligent and helpful to her father, was allowed to spend her days away from home. Surely if Mr. Wickford needed assistance, it was the place of that unruly boy, Stephen Jr., now rapidly becoming the terror of the village, to stand beside his father.

Popular sentiment reached such a pitch that Mrs. Wickford was finally "spoken to", at which the faded woman, usually so concessive, flared into a veritable shrew, stating in no gentle words that she was able

to manage her own household and would thank her neighbors to do the same.

The truth is that by this time young Stephen was utterly beyond her control. He had refused to go to school, and the suggestion that he accompany his father to the post-office would have been met, as Mrs. Wickford knew, by jeers and profanity.

That, from the first, she had taken the wrong course with him, even her besotted heart realized. But it was too late now to change. With a sense of bitter inward as well as outward defiance, she continued to subject herself to the caprices of her tyrant, losing no opportunity to demonstrate in the presence of others her pride and belief in him.

The old negroes began to mutter that Mis' Wickford was callin' down a jedgment on herse'f an' dat onery son o' hern!

Whatever the force of prophecy, it is certain that within a year of Julia's establishment as her father's colleague the boy died. It was a short illness, lasting but three days. With him, though her unnamed malady extended over as many months, died the wan creature who, in giving him life, had replenished her own.

Existence in the little post-office went on almost tragically, as usual. For a while Julia attempted to keep up, unaided, the household duties also; but finding that the double work interfered too much with her reading, she employed, for a ridiculous pittance, the services of an elderly negress. From this time onward the child's real intellectual and moral life might be said to have begun.

When little Ciceley Taliaferro started to school in town, taking her place in the threadbare but still aristocratic establishment known as the "Misses Hallonquest's Female Seminary," and Julia was shown the immaculate new text-books, the elder girl took them into her hands, turning them over, staring first at one shining cover and then its reverse as if doubting the evidence of her own eyesight. It was literally the first time she had seen or touched a new book. Vaguely she had believed them all to be either battered and much ruffled at the corners, or else securely armored in heavy leather bindings.

Before this she had, of course, found her way into all the remaining Hill libraries. The splendid Wickford collection had gone down into ashes; but Mr. Warriner held his long rows of classics unbroken, and old Mrs. Dering, whose father had been an English archdeacon, was particularly vain of her inherited literary stores. She never by any chance opened one of the sacred volumes herself, but in allowing Julia access to them, impressed her with a sense of being given some sort of posthumous benediction. It contained an appalling array of "Dick's Commentaries", and somber series of the discourses of Jeremy Taylor, John Donne, and other noted divines. Of all the musty hoard, Julia, in those earlier days, found but two which came to be a part of her, — "Pilgrim's Progress" and a realistically illustrated copy of "Fox's Book of Martyrs."

The one great, free, and vital treasure house was in the low-beamed library of Roycroft. The elder Roy was still a great reader. He alone upon the

dwindling Hill had been known to purchase a few new books since the war. Most of these, to Julia's subsequent delight, proved to be novels. On his open shelves — for very properly he disdained the coffin-like, locked doors of the conventional bookcase — one could reach up, tilting at random some gold-lettered tome, certain of finding a new joy. Classics and treatises on cricket, imperishable poems and German philosophy, fat books of history and Dickens' latest novel here rubbed friendly shoulders.

Under the stimulus of Julia's ardor, the boy Jim began to read. Fenimore Cooper was his first idol. Through all the many tales Julia followed breathlessly, and for a while the two friends repeopled for themselves the glades and dim pine forests of their native Hill. There were moments of shivering delight when almost they saw, standing grim and reproachful among sylvan shadows, the form of some noble Red Man. Their mode of greeting was a smothered war cry, and whole bands of younger children were trained in the mazes of the death dance. Julia's very vocabulary became Cooperian. Old Mrs. Rogers, being acquainted with this latest exhibition of Julia Wickford's "queerness", gave a characteristic sniff and remarked that if the poor motherless girl had followed *her* advice and concentrated her reading on Mrs. Sherwood's excellent tales, this new scandal might have been avoided.

With the passing of the Indians came early English history, of which the favorite book was "Froissart's Chronicles." Mr. Roy possessed of this a tome so venerable that each page held the yellow stains of time,

and throughout the letter "s" continued to be a thrilling "f." It was a source of deep regret to Julia that neither she nor Jim had an "s" to their name, which might have been so transformed.

Meanwhile little Ciceley, attending five days of each week her Female Seminary, found happiness in the acquisition of many new girl friends, but, on the other hand, a Slough of Despond in the necessity of preparing lessons. All studying was supposed to be done at home; the use of a schoolroom was merely for parrot-like recitations. Arithmetic was her special bane. In calling upon Julia for assistance, it grew to be a regular custom that the elder girl should spend each "study" evening in the Taliaferro home, equipping her timid cousin for the next day's tilt with learning. Even at the time, Julia was entirely conscious of the advantage to herself. She was always one to see clearly, not only for others, but — what is far rarer — for herself as well. In her gratitude to the unconscious Ciceley, a deep and tender regard found permanent place in her heart.

Besides, there were things about Ciceley hard to resist, a fact which the growing Jim was soon to realize. The elder ladies referred to her as "that sweet child." There was no one on the Hill who did not love her.

It was in the spring of Ciceley's graduation from the Misses Hallonquest that Henry Dering returned. He too became a favorite of old ladies. They called him "a nice youth." In their sentimental hearts the union of these favored ones appeared a desirable, even a predestined accomplishment.

But Jim Roy read no more. From the moment of Henry's open challenge and the dropping of his handkerchief at Ciceley's feet, Jim changed from a genial, rollicking leader into a sulking cave-man. No one but Julia realized how deep his hurt. She went to Ciceley. "Can't you see," she demanded, her gray eyes black with the intensity of her pleading, "that Jim is the real thing, and Henry just a lot of finishing touches, with the essential man left out?"

Ciceley had wept. Her tears always lay in a shallow basin. She did not attempt to argue, but between the childish sobs, Julia caught phrases, "Oh, Jule, how can you? Jim never has cared for me like — like you think. Henry isn't just finishing touches. Everybody but you thinks he's wonderful!"

"But I tell you, Sis, Jim does care for you as I think," vehemently insisted the other. "I know Jim. He is made up of you. You're his core, — his medulla!" Even Julia at times fell before the temptation to air recent knowledge. "Do you feel sure, this soon, that you like Henry better than Jim?"

Ciceley nodded, still sobbing, at which, after a quiver of something related to scorn, Julia smiled.

The afternoon following the picnic Julia sat alone in the room back of the post-office boxes. She was bent in absorption over some papers on her desk. This useful if somewhat cumbrous article of furniture had been built for her out of old boxes by the Hill carpenter, "Buck" Johnson. She wore a frown of concentration; and well might she frown, for this latest task set for herself was no less than the mastery of shorthand.

For nearly a year past the girl had toiled for proficiency in this comparatively lucrative calling. By its means she had determined to secure a fixed and more adequate salary, instead of the fluctuating pittance of her government office. Money was dreadfully needed.

Being now definitely the breadwinner, she assumed, — though quite conscious of the Hill's almost frenzied opposition to the New Woman movement then just come to its ears, — her right to attempt and receive, in hard cash, what her services might be made to command.

The first open step in her venture was soon to be taken. She had never yet entered a real town office. The prospect held something for thrills. She could see herself passing the small, gilded sign, "James Preston, Attorney-at-Law", mounting boldly the shadowy flight of uncarpeted steps, and knocking, still boldly, no matter what her inner tremors, on the door with the same gilded name. From her reading she knew that all lawyers had their names on a misty glass door.

Now the feminine Julia leaned back. There was still one detail to be settled. What clothes should she wear? In the books, the brave heroine adventuring for employment went invariably clad in dark blue, with white collars and cuffs. Her only blue coat-suit was shabby and much out of date, but she thought, with a lifting of hope, of some old-fashioned collars and cuffs that had belonged to her mother, and which, after mending and starching, would be quite perfect as accessories.

Into the smiling prevision crept Ciceley Taliaferro. Julia started, and caught herself back to the present.

"You were right, Jule!" the girl cried, in coming. "Poor old Jim did care, just as you said. I told him that Henry and I were engaged, and he looked awful! 'Most like that old bull when he's trying to chase us. I never dreamed Jim could get mad! When?" she gasped out, in reply to the other's sharp question. "Oh, only just now — in my garden. He made me pull off this poor pink by the head. It's a shame, too," she murmured, caressing the stemless flower. "The first on the bush, and so sweet!"

"Yes, I'm sure that the pink feels its tragedy," remarked Julia drily. "You have told Jim Roy definitely 'No'? You are certain you never will change? That you love Henry Dering?"

"Why, of course I am sure," answered Ciceley, displaying some spirit and also a little astonishment at her friend's strange emotion. "I have promised! Besides," here her lovely face flushed, and she broke into school-girlish giggles, "over there by the mill — yesterday, on the picnic — Henry kissed me. You know that I've got to marry him after he's done that!"

"Where did Jim go just now — when you told him?"

"Jim!" echoed the other, "Oh — Jim! I don't know. Somewhere, with Rover following him."

When finally Ciceley had left, Julia sprang to her feet. Her papers were pushed, anyhow, to the back

of the desk. She turned the old key, at the same time her left hand upheld toward her hat on its peg. A glance at the clock showed her that closing time was a full hour off, but for once she did not care. Her course through the woods never swerved. She had not loved Jim all her life to be baffled by physical hindrances.

From her hour with Jim she came back very slowly. All the youth, all the hopes of her girlhood were drained out of her face. She recalled few of his actual phrases. Only one, — there was one, — had burned deep in her heart.

"You remember, Jule, in those Western stories we used to read and act there was a dog called a 'one-man dog'?"

"Yes, Jim," she had answered.

"Well, I know I'm a one-woman man. Sis can marry that ninny. She could marry a dozen more like him, and still there could never be any girl in the world for me, except Sis."

Julia went to Judge Preston, and was given at once a position. The Hill ladies, led by old Mrs. Rogers and cadenced by Miss Delia Turrentine, set up a nine days' protestation. Julia Wickford, always "queer", had finally disgraced herself, and with it thrown scorn on the Hill. A girl of her birth, of her present connection, of a lifetime association with *them*, to turn to a clerk, and in a man's office at that! Even the Judge's vague and protecting relationship did little to quiet the storm. In the midst of it Julia committed a still greater outrage. The old Wickford kitchen was rented to negroes, and Julia, seeking

neither counsel nor advice, moved with her father to town. The Hill ladies admitted, with nods of gloomy satisfaction, that under the unfortunate circumstances it was best to have her away.

A few months later she and the Judge were quietly married. At the news fresh but now laudatory clamors arose. Julia clearly had sacrificed herself for her father; and, strangely enough, the proud dames who had been most against her for seeking to earn her own and her father's living by work, now wept with delight at this evidence of filial devotion. In a mass they went into the town to leave cards. Julia, in her stately and beautifully furnished mansion, received them as if nothing had happened. She showed them her father's neat rooms, his study and private bath. Mr. Wickford's pride in his daughter's latest achievement was pathetically obvious.

At the end of a year a son lay in Julia Preston's arms. If before she had seemed merely contented, it was certain that now she knew rapture.

Meanwhile, on the Hill things adjusted themselves to the old lines. Whatever Jim's inner desolation, he became, to all outer appearances, the same genial and popular boy. He avoided neither Ciceley nor Henry, whose engagement became one of the everyday facts. They were not to be married immediately; the delay on one side was because of Ciceley's youth and her mother's increasing ill-health; on the other, as Henry grandiloquently stated, because he wished to be settled in business, to be sure he could earn his own living, before assuming a married man's burdens.

At Julia's request, he was taken into Judge Pres-

ton's law office. The admixture of friendship and business, always a precarious benefice, became in this instance something far worse. Not only was Henry incapable, but so lazy, so sure of his own superior attainments, that his presence became a scourge.

Then Ciceley's mother died. Henry, who since his hour of triumph in winning her from Jim had been far from an ardent *fiancé*, now openly neglected the grief-stricken girl.

At this, old Mrs. Dering, who had grown sincerely fond of Ciceley, declaring her "one of those yielding, domestic girls who make the best wives", took a hand in her son's tangled affairs. She resented his treatment of the bereaved child and the comments she knew it provoked. Deeper than this, thrust deep in her proud mother-heart, was the fear, grown of late to black knowledge, that Henry both gambled and drank.

With the fatuous belief of such mothers, she was sure that the one thing to curb his wild tendencies, to steady him once and for all, was marriage. Little Sis, in her part of sacrificial lamb, was given no chance of escape. One bleak autumn day in the parlor of "Woodbine", as the Dering place then was called, Ciceley became Henry Dering's wife.

With the coming of her first child, Lucille, the young mother, feeling the whole world reborn in her personal joy, re-christened the home, with old Mrs. Dering's sanction, with the name Little Sunshine. A second child, also a girl, was born. During these years Henry had not made advance, either in the hoped-for steadiness or in his capacity for earning.

But Ciceley was one who never questioned. The late hours in town, explained always by the carelessly flung phrase, "troublesome business", were accepted in childish good faith.

But the mother at last could see clearly. When, in the fourth year of her son's marriage, an attack of gripe brought complications which were shortly to terminate in death, it was rather the corrosion of disappointment than the actual effect of disease, which proved fatal.

This fact Ciceley, of course, never guessed. She had grown deeply to love and respect the somewhat reserved old aristocrat, and her loss was a blighting renewal of all she had suffered in losing her own mother.

Mrs. Dering's will left the homestead, Little Sunshine, to Ciceley and Ciceley's children. The other few pieces of property and some bonds out at excellent interest were given to Henry.

Henry opened a suite of shining new offices. His name was painted large, in gold letters, on the door. They announced him not only a lawyer, but a broker, promoter, transactor of mortgages, stocks, and bonds. He took Ciceley in town that she might gaze on the splendor. But Ciceley, behind her black veil, wept softly, and whispered that now she hoped he would be with her oftener in the evening.

But instead of prompt home-comings, Henry remained away whole nights at a time. Now his keen-eyed old mother was gone, he had ceased to offer Ciceley either apology or excuse. Others knew that in a few months he had run through all the cash

left him ; and of what landed property he had been possessed nothing remained but the homestead, secure by its title to Ciceley, and a worthless few acres impinging upon a negro settlement called, appropriately, "Sand Town."

And then, one golden day, when the air was so filled with perfume that one hardly knew whether it was bird or flower that sang, Henry Dering was brought home dead. It was due to a sudden heart collapse, the compassionate old family doctor told her.

He lay in state, in the long, shadowy parlor. White flowers rose in a pyramid about him. To Ciceley the rigid white face was more beautiful than that of any carved knight on an old-world sepulchre. They placed him in the near-by mausoleum where all of the exiled Derings slept, and Ciceley, on her knees before the blinding Power that gives and takes away, consecrated her young life to her husband's memory, to impassioned and selfless life-service to his children.

All these things came to pass, and had been accepted, but no whisper did the widow hear of the small black wound in her husband's breast, or the hand of self-cowardice which had made it.

Quietly Jim took upon himself the care of his dead cousin's family. He called himself Henry's executor, a barren term which, in a less close-knit community, would surely have caused heartless gibes.

Julia was often with Ciceley. Some months of each summer she, with her boy, spent at Little Sunshine, alternating between the Hill and the town, to which the Judge, who cared little for country living, stubbornly clung.

When Julia's boy, Wickford, was eleven, his father died, leaving what was then considered in the South a fair fortune to his "beloved wife, Julia Wickford Preston, the best and the wisest of women." There had been no restrictions and only one personal request, — that she should take their boy to England, there to receive education at the school and the university still dear to the English father's heart.

The futile existence of old Mr. Wickford had come to a peaceful end some years before, and she had no excuse for deterring the wish of "Wick's" father. So it came about that Julia, still young, entirely inexperienced in travel, a little daunted for perhaps the first time in her life by the great, new adventure, clothed from head to the arch of her very beautiful instep in the "weeds" which her part of the world still considered essential, took her boy's hand in her own, and set forth.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLONEL JIM RECEIVES A LETTER

COMMUNITIES, like individuals, conserve in direct ratio to their isolation the advantage of flattering personal convictions. Where, for instance, in this temperate zone of ours can be found a locality which does not claim at least certain phases of climatic perfection? Most frequently the month of October is arrogantly held forth for proof.

At any rate, it is not to be denied that Richmond Hill, while admitting that other parts of the world might sometimes know the meaning of fine weather, retained a profound assurance that nowhere else did this "season of mist and mellow fruitfulness" materialize in so personal, so fragrant, and so loving a spirit of benediction.

On a certain morning, early in this month of gold, Jim Roy, now a middle-aged bachelor, and long since established in the community as "Colonel Jim", stepping out upon his wide verandah into an aura of early sunshine, might well have been pardoned his involuntary thrill of pride. The long avenue of live oaks, stretching to a huge front entrance gate so

distant that it had the look of a fairy stile, had increased in growth until now he peered along what seemed a concrete arch of green. Whole families of subway trains could have rushed, side by side, under its muffled roof. Armies could have marched there, and their elbows scarcely brushed the azalea bushes fringing the distant borders. It lay now wide and cool and empty as a forsaken church. From the east the sun thrust in great quivering columns of pink light. Just where one fell, spreading a pool of radiance, a wild rabbit, dashing in from the undergrowth, paused and deliberately sat upright, his pointed ears like the petals of an orchid.

At this vision, old Rover — Stag Harbor had always maintained a succession of Rovers — gave a single indignant yelp, and hurled himself down the steps. He might as well have chased a sunbeam.

His master, descending with less precipitancy, paused to take in a long breath of green-filtered air; and afterward, turning sharply to the left, made his way through shrubbery dripping with morning wet, and emerged at the rim of a great clearing. All about it stood the thick pine growth of the original forest, trees dark and slender, the cloud-shaped crests ranged as immovably as hill tops against the clear morning sky.

On the flat, open space with its slight Southern slope, appeared row after row of symmetrically planted trees, shrubs, rather, for no central stems were visible, — low, crouching bushes of compact, ever-green foliage, polished and deep and vital in hue as the leaves of ivy, newly drenched. Each was self-rounded

and humped to an almost humorous similitude, and each being equi-distant from its neighbors, the area had the mathematical look of a checkerboard set with gigantic green gumdrops.

Not in idle boasting had Colonel Jim announced himself to be a farmer. He had found a thing to do with his presumably barren lands. Here before him grew and flourished the first Satsuma orange grove known to that part of the world. Already it was famous.

At all seasons the grove was beautiful. In early spring each leafy igloo whitened under a snow of blossoms. The scent of them hung heavy in the air for miles around. Almost, it would seem, the mocking birds must burst into a wedding march. This was the time at which the young people loved to visit it, coming in pairs, strolling silently with covert, shy side-looks, or else romping among the fragrant hummocks, with outbursts of giggling and shrill laughter, according to their kind.

Its exhibition period, so to speak, was in November, when the long-laden branches poured to the very sands a cataract of golden fruit. But to the owner, who now stood literally "loving it" with kind, blue eyes, the present phase of quiet, untheatrical, green bearing, was the most touching and beautiful of all. There was something so "darned plucky" about the staggering little trees. How dared they offer him such bounty? Not a slender limb was left unstrained. Each sagged to the utmost limit of resilience. Many were propped up from beneath, on stakes, but even with this aid, the thick-set twigs dragged cruelly.

From one to another overloaded growth he went, often reaching a hand out in instinctive encouragement. In his heart he was thankful for them that harvest time was now so near. Only a few more weeks, and the gold of their branches was, by the commonplace magic of demand and supply, to be transmuted into the more durable gold of national currency. Jim, somewhat to his own astonishment, had become wealthy. Externally, at least, he was in every way a properous and most fortunate man. Of his long, lonely hours in the vast apartments of Stag Harbor he complained to none, not even to himself. The great house, kept now in a state of meticulous repair, was more than ever the "show place" of Richmond Hill. Jim used it as casually as an Indian his small peaked tent.

His real life was lived either out in the orange grove, or "over to Sis's", as he habitually referred to Little Sunshine. Here were kept two chairs, one of oak with a split hickory bottom, that had its nook on the verandah, and the other a huge concave of worn leather and delightfully responsive springs, just at the left corner of Ciceley's dining-room fire. Both were known preëemptively as "Uncle Jim's."

As a transition phase of these alternating existences might be mentioned his daily visit to the post-office, where he was always sure of finding loitering friends and a vociferous welcome. The shabby little building over which Mr. Wickford and his "smart little girl" once held sway had long since blown down, its scattered boards serving literally as a windfall of firewood to the negroes. The site was not rebuilt. Mr. Bean,

the storekeeper, after some desultory handling of red tape, had persuaded an indulgent government to place the new post-office under his roof. By this astute move he not only added by obvious and legitimate means to his source of revenue, but more subtly, with wily tentacles that clutched the skirts of distant villages, established "Bean's Emporium" as the social and mercantile focus of an entire countryside.

Although it had not been quite six o'clock on this particular October morning when the Colonel had sauntered out among his orange trees, the clang of Uncle Snow's great, brazen, breakfast bell, an hour later, broke through his reverie with a start of surprise. Surely a whole hour had not passed! Uncle Snow was "shoving up" the time on him. With a boyish impulse to plague the old man, Jim pretended not to hear.

Uncle Snow, the one permanent house-servant at Stag Harbor, had received his name originally by way of satire. His skin was of that dull blue-blackness which indicates the purest African descent, and in youth the thick woolly head-covering had been an answering mass of soot. Quite early it had begun to gray, and then became as white as the cotton bolls he used to gather. It had now the look of a foaming lather emerging from an ebony bowl. All the children of the Hill believed that Uncle Snow had been born with white hair.

Again the bell clamored. Rover, leaping into the air, yelped an agonized response. Jim gazed innocently toward the sky.

"You, Marse Jim," came a thin, cracked voice

from somewhere in the direction of the house, "you know you heers dat bell. De angel Gabrul might 'a' heered it! Come to yo' breakfus' dis minnit!"

The dog, crouching for a second spring, fixed his brook-brown eyes on the upturned face, and then suddenly, with a sound of tearing cloth, hurled himself full against his master's waistcoat.

"Get down, you — you catapult!" roared Jim, beating him off. "There's my last button gone!"

"Marse *Ji-i-m*!"

"All right! I'm coming! Between you and this fool dog I don't dare call my soul my own."

Rover, ecstatic now, and callous to objurgation, led the way in a squirming crescent. Each moment his eye flashed backward to see whether the recalcitrant one was following.

Jim ate his meals from a cloth spread across one end of a mahogany table that would have seated twenty guests. Rover took his usual place on the floor, well within reach of a frequently extended hand of benefice. As the last waffle was being thus dually devoured, Jim asked of the hovering Snow, "Hands beginning to come in yet?"

"Yassur. Jes' three on 'em to-day."

"Is Josh one of 'em?"

"Yassur. An' Buck Jones, an' dat blue-gum nigger, Tode Cornstalk. Sumhow I don't hold much wid dat Tode."

"Oh," said Jim carelessly, "Comstock's a fool all right, but he's strong as an ox."

"He's sassy, he is. Ain't got no respecterbul word fer nobody, white *or* black," persisted Uncle Snow.

"He's what I calls a dangerous nigger to have around. Rover don't like him none too well, needer," the old man added, with Machiavellian craft.

Jim's face sobered. He looked down at Rover as if for corroboration. The dog's eyes answered steadily. His shaggy tail swept in agitated semi-circles.

"I seen him kickin' at Rover. He 'lowed as how he wuz gwinter bust his slats."

"Huh," said Jim thoughtfully. "Well, pay him off this Saturday, and tell him we won't need him any more. And, Snow —"

"Yassur."

"You see to it that he doesn't ever get a job on Miss Ciceley's place."

"Yassur."

"Reminds me," said Jim, now rising, while Rover, with an expression of resigned disappointment, prepared to follow, "I promised to stroll over there this morning and see about having that west field harrowed. It's plumb eaten up with pigweed."

"Yassur," murmured Snow, suspiciously demure.

As Jim swung out of the room, the old man watched with a sort of somber wistfulness the tall, slouching figure. Uncle Snow, no less than Jim, had his unfulfilled romance. For more years than the "young folks" could remember, he and Aunt Nycie, Ciceley's devoted nurse, had been "keepin' company." They longed to be married, to possess the certainty of comradeship, hand in hand, down the gray slope of later life. There was nothing to withhold them, for each was free, nothing but that sense of loyalty, of deep

devotion to a charge, which, not infrequently, is found among the older generations of their race. They had talked it over placidly, sitting by Aunt Nycie's fire of winter nights, while sweet potatoes and corn pones slowly crusted in the ashes; or during the summer weather, out on her tiny individual "porch", over which the Lady Banksia roses foamed, and potted plants, geranium, "wandering Jew", or, clove pinks, set each in a rusty tin, sent forth shoots more lush and beautiful than those from any costly jardinière.

From time immemorial, or so it seemed to the young folks, Uncle Snow had gone "co'tin'" Aunt Nycie on Sunday evenings. Always he brought a little gift, a few sticks of peppermint candy, a ball of "honey" pop-corn carefully wrapped in its pink tissue coating, or sometimes a cheap and worthless trinket, prized by these simple souls in direct proportion to its utter worthlessness.

At least once during each visit, the subject so near the hearts of both was touched upon.

"I jes' kaint leave Marse Jim along of hissef' in dat big house o' hisn's," Uncle Snow would say, generally apropos of nothing.

"An' my Miss Ciceley needs her mammy more dan ebber, wid dem gals o' hern growin' up into young pelikims, same as de sign ober de front do'. Dey would tear de las' pin-fedder outer my baby's breas', ef dey took de notion," Aunt Nycie would respond.

"Ef only Marse Jim an' Miss Ciceley would open dey eyes an' see each odder, an' git ma'a'ied," was Uncle Snow's invariable, if hopeless, following remark. Then both would sigh, and gaze deep into glowing

coals, wondering in loyal dumbness at the "contrarieness" of white folks.

Colonel Jim, on his way to Little Sunshine and the pigweed, stopped in at Bean's Emporium. It was an act of habit rather than definite intention. In approaching the integral nook which held the post-office, Jim's footsteps noticeably lagged. Of recent years his mail had grown to be distressingly voluminous. The reading and answering of business letters was the one hated penalty incurred by success. Jim literally shrank from the sight of letters. A special largesse, thrust grinningly at him through the window, had been known to incite loud outbursts of profanity. It was therefore with a blenching eye, but a voice of challenging cordiality that he asked, "Anything for me this mornin', Mr. Bean?"

The postmaster and general proprietor of the Emporium, being rubicund both as to face and hair was known inevitably as "Red Bean."

"Lots!" encouraged Bean, and proceeded to sort them from a tottering heap.

"Good Lord!" moaned Jim, while near-by "box-warmers", as the store loafers were ignominiously termed, rose and strolled nearer.

"There's one here that smells mighty sweet, Colonel," said Mr. Bean, with a grin.

"Quit your kiddin'," growled Jim. "Nobody writes to me but citrus men and fertilizers."

"There ain't no fertilizer on this billy-doo!" declared Mr. Bean, his enjoyment deepening with the flush on Jim's countenance.

"Here, you fellows," cried Jim, flinging his arms to

right and left. "Back off a little 'til I see who it is."

Instantly, with exaggerated haste, they drew away, flattening themselves against the narrow confines of the wall. On each weather-beaten face was a wide and meaning smile. Four pairs of twinkling eyes focussed on the pale-blue tinted missive.

Jim, who knew few reserves, cautiously opened it. It had many pages, closely written in a hand unmistakably feminine. In the unfolding a perfume, exquisite and in some subtle way intellectual rather than sensuous, crept through the tense air. Nudges of those against the wall, and suggestive clearings of manly throats, ensued. Jim, sheepish but determined, turned hastily to the last page, and its signature.

"By the Lord Harry!" he exclaimed, almost letting it fall. "If it isn't from Jule Wickford!"

All grins ceased. A deep interest grew in eyes that had suddenly lost their mischievous twinkle.

"Little Jule Wickford!" breathed one, in a tone of incredulity.

"She's Mrs. Judge Preston now," amended another, while a third observed, "That boy of hers must be nearly a grown man, by this time."

"He's just through college, — that English one," corroborated Jim, his eyes darting eagerly among the fluttering pages. "She's bringing him home. Says she don't want him to be cut off from his own home and people. That's just like Jule, God bless her. One of the finest women ever made!"

His listeners, supplemented by the Red Bean who,

being a comparative newcomer, had never so much as heard the name of Julia Wickford, enthusiastically seconded the encomium.

"She's in New York now," read Jim, tossing out scraps of information much as he did bits of waffle to his dog. "She's starting south almost any day. Don't want — Gee!" He paused, and a look of consternation grew. "She says for me not to tell anybody. Wants it to be a surprise; and here I've bleated out the whole shebang!"

With one accord his audience assured him that the delightful news should not go further; but as most of the group were married men, Jim displayed a not unnatural skepticism.

"It's Sis, — Mrs. Dering, — that she wants to surprise most. You-all must see to it that *she* doesn't get a hint."

All nodded violent assent. With this he left them, his eyes still bent upon the pages. All other letters had been deposited, unopened, in a coat pocket.

Under the wayside shadows, Jim strolled along, unconscious of direction. The scented sheets were carefully placed in sequence, and were now given an uninterrupted perusal.

DEAR OLD JIM,

How many years? Perhaps it is wiser not to count them! And now I am coming home. The boy has finished his course at Oxford, and did wonderfully well. The dear Hill people are going to think him a typical English "Johnnie", I'm afraid, but it will not take them long to rediscover the sound, sweet

kernel of the boy who left them, only because of his father's wish. I am so proud of Wick! I think you are going to be proud, too. In the very thought of being home again among "you-all", I feel myself changing back into a girl. I want my coming to be a surprise. The whole lot of you have been horrid about not writing. This is going to be a sort of a merry revenge. I am specially anxious to startle Ciceley. Don't you *dare* give me away! I am only telling you because I felt that I would burst if I didn't. Dear little Ciceley! I can hardly imagine her with two daughters nearly grown. In the nature of things she must have changed. That lovely, bright bronze hair of hers may even have a few white threads. Mine is quite gray, but, since it never possessed any particular color, it makes little difference in my usual neutral appearance. And how about Jim! Well, dear old friend, no matter what may have happened to our outsides, I feel sure that, once back among you, I shall be just a happy Hill child. How we shall live again, in speech and memory, those wonderful, distant days! Is old Mrs. Rogers still alive and dominant? And how is Uncle Snow?

For another page she went on asking eager questions, then, with a flash of common sense that brought back her personality with startling vividness, dashed in:

But how utterly absurd to deluge you with queries, when there is no time for you to answer, and when, thank Heaven, I shall soon be finding out the millions of things I want to know, for myself! Be sure to keep Sis in the dark. I can scarcely wait to get there.

Until that joyous moment when your two dear, big, cordial fists are in my own, and with my impatient lips I can "ax you howdy" I am, devotedly always,
JULE.

Jim drew a long, long breath, slowly folded the letter, and stood still. A queer sensation as of having been bodily lifted and set down in a vanished environment made the very sunshine unfamiliar. A dog brushed against his knees, whining softly. The man stared down. Surely it was the same Rover, who, perhaps an hour before, had barked at a cow which frightened two little girls, thin-legged little girls, named Jule and Ciceley!

And whose was this deep green avenue where he and Rover had come to a pause? The trees were thicker, the shade more dense than really they should be. And whose the white pillared mansion at the far end?

With a disgusted, "Shucks! What has Jule's letter done to me anyway?" Jim pulled himself together.

Yet the fact remained that it was without personal volition he had entered his own gate, and proceeded half way toward the house. His intention, until Jule's letter had cast its spell, was to visit Little Sunshine. The better part of the morning still remained, and yet Jim hesitated. He glanced backward, over a broad shoulder, to his gate, then forward again, to where steps seemed to beckon him. Where he stood was exactly midway between the two.

"If I go to Sis now," he murmured aloud, "she'll be sure to see that something's the matter, and before I know it, she'll guess what. Women are built like

that. Reckon I'd better wait until my mind gets used to keeping a secret from her." With which sapient self-communication, he flung up his chin, and, loudly encouraged by his leaping dog, made his way toward his home.

CHAPTER FIVE

JIM BREAKS AN OLD PROMISE, AND MAKES A NEW ONE

THE afternoon leaned far toward the sunset hour before Jim, feeling himself at last a safe custodian of Julia's confidences, ventured to set forth for Little Sunshine.

He went down the steps, Rover, as usual, close at his heels. The air was motionless. A blue vapor dragged across the wide plain which held the dunes of his orange trees, changing their polished green surfaces into knolls of inky blackness. Under the shadowing live oaks quivered already the chill of coming night. Somewhere a drowsy and contented cricket chipped off silvery flakes of sound.

Once through his gate and out under the open sky, the scene, by contrast, presented an almost urban activity. An electric tramcar was rushing down the Hill. Rover, to whom the passing of each car was a personal challenge, hurled himself into pursuit. A gruff "Come here, you fool! What would you do with the blamed thing if you caught it?" drew him back, fawning and sheepish.

Charcoal and "light-wood" wagons, emptied now

of their primitive commodities, crept wearily up the slope, their drivers for the most part slumbering peacefully on the bare board floorings, while the jaded beasts which drew them plodded toward home, that goal so dumbly and steadily craved. Negroes in groups of two and three, returning from the day's work, lifted their rich, throaty voices in snatches of concerted song.

"Good evenin', Marse Jim," or "Good evenin', Colonel," said each in turn, raising a quick hand to a battered cap-rim. Invariably there was a second greeting and a stooping pat for Rover, who was quite as well known of the Hill as his master. Indeed, so inseparable were the two that it would have been difficult to think of one without the other.

Ciceley's place, unlike that of Colonel Jim's, did not face directly upon the main road. To approach it, one needed to turn into a broad, sandy street which might have been called a lane but for its width. On each side grew enormous junipers, the branches meeting at so low a pitch overhead that a tall man could reach up almost anywhere to pluck a shaggy spray. In midsummer, when the sun drew forth the secret, resinous odor of these boughs, the air became steeped in an Oriental incense.

From the moment of turning one could see, at no great distance, the big, brick-pillared gate of Little Sunshine, bearing its stirrup latch.

Jim, reaching this, raised it softly, and then, gaining the farther side, let it fall with deliberate force. Against the stillness, as upon some vast, hollow, sanctuary door, rang the sharp summons. Its echo, a keen

stipple of sound reluctantly disintegrating, shivered along the earth and rose among tree-tops.

As if in answer to an awaited signal, a black-clad figure, wearing a small, gray, crocheted shoulder-shawl, ran out from the house door, and stood at the top of the verandah step, gazing tense and motionless toward the gate.

The two girls were, as usual, overdue. They should have returned by the last car. This was what they had promised her. By the time the next one could arrive, it would be quite dark. This was a source of constant dread to Ciceley, — the fear that her young daughters should at some time, because of tardiness, be forced to walk home from the car, at night, without masculine protection. Under the stimulus of maternal forebodings, the country lane, usually so open and secure, became a veritable dark grotto from Dante's hell. Repetition was powerless to dull the edge of her imagination. Always, as now, she had terrifying visions of ambushed highwaymen, mad dogs lathered as if for shaving, or, worst of all, a fierce, rampaging bull, pawing the earth in his eagerness to gore her two imprudent darlings, one upon each bloody and triumphant horn.

She peered now, almost praying aloud in her earnestness, for a sight of those two empty, adored young heads above the gate. But it was only Jim, and the loud cheerfulness of his "Hello! Sis!" did little to mitigate the watcher's disappointment.

Jim, happily unconscious of his blighting effect, strode up the walk; while Rover, on his best behavior as always when the stirrup latch was passed,

ambled decorously in the rear, his low-hung head and shaggy mane swinging in rhythm with the broad shoulders of his master. By the time the foot of the steps was reached, Mrs. Dering had achieved an absent-minded smile, intended by way of welcome.

"Worrying about those girls again, I'll bet my hat," remarked the visitor, as he slowly mounted toward her.

"Yes, I am. I can't help it. I am always worried when they don't come on the car they promised. Now it will be pitch dark before they can possibly get here."

Lifting the article of headgear so casually jeopardized, the Colonel made as if to pass, moving in the direction of the big hickory rocking-chair, known as his. A second impulse checked him. Ciceley had not stirred by an inch. Anxiety ruffled her forehead; her dark eyes rested on the gate through which the tardy ones should have entered.

The man had yet two steps to ascend. This brought his face on an exact level with hers. In all his life he had never gazed, with conscious scrutiny, on Ciceley, and it was now with a dull sense of disloyalty that he found himself looking among the carelessly arranged masses of her hair for the white strands suggested by Jule. His own temples, as he knew, were noticeably brushed with silver. Instinctively he put up a hand to one of them.

Rover suddenly threw back his head. His faithful eyes had a troubled questioning. The sensitive dog-soul, made up for the most part of love for these

two beings, felt the unusual in their greeting. He did not like it. A few more volts of this subtle menace, and he would have howled. The Colonel, however, was just drawing a long breath of satisfaction. No, Ciceley's dark locks were as yet unassailed.

Now Jim moved over to his chair, and Rover, also strangely relieved, though by what influence he did not know, stretched himself at full length. The world was good again!

Jim, with the unconsciousness of habit, plunged a hand into one of his sagging coat pockets, drawing out a much-used pipe, with its complementary pouch and box of matches. A tiny, votive flame danced for an instant above this small altar of masculine content.

"Oh, come along, Sis. Sit down," he urged, after a few reposeful whiffs. "You know if those young 'uns of yours are late, it only means that each of 'em has caught a beau."

Ciceley slowly turned. Her anxious expression lightened just a little. For the first time since his arrival, she looked at Jim as if he were really there. Now she reached a tentative hand toward her own smaller rocking-chair. Jim, at ease, made no motion to assist. He and Ciceley were too well used to each other for such punctilious courtesies.

"If I could only be sure," she murmured, seating herself.

"You can! Aren't they eternally coming home with a new kill?"

Ciceley displayed a shy dimple. Catching his humorous, half-accusing eyes, her smile deepened,

and a flush made her cheeks young. One would have thought her charged with personal coquetry.

"They are disgraceful young flirts, the two of 'em!" fumed the Colonel. Under her look of merry skepticism he was goaded into the accusation. "And you are just as bad as they are, for you glory in their devilment! I'm ashamed of the whole bunch of you!"

At this scathing denunciation his listener threw back her head and laughed. It was a sound low and exquisite, thrilled with a woodland freedom. Ciceley did not often laugh, but when she did, one thought of ferns in wind-swept, shadowed nooks, of birds fluting from hidden choirs. One seemed to see, as well as hear, the lovely cadences. Jim watched her hungrily. He thought of the small, brown, Southern butterfly, usually so inconspicuous and demure, which suddenly, and always unexpectedly, flashes apart the tightly closed wings, showing a dazzling flash of gold. If only he could win for his own this small, brown butterfly! — could, at the touch of love, make the bright wings gleam for him!

He drew a heavy sigh, which was broken in upon, midway, by the laughing words, "You dear old humbug! You're as proud of them this minute as I am!"

"Proud!" vociferated the Colonel, taken unaware. "Nothing of the sort!"

"You can't help seeing that they are —" What Ciceley wished to say was "beautiful", but since, in the minds of the conservative Hill, such terms in the mouth of a parent were not only unseemly but positively indelicate, she transformed it hastily into the milder "sweet."

The Colonel understood. "They're neither of them a patch on what you were at their age," he averred with emphasis.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried at this, aghast at such wanton desecration of her idols, "You know that isn't true. I was never really — pretty, and Lucille — why, just look at Lucille! She's — everybody says —" Again forbidden adjectives stayed her.

"Lucille's not bad-looking," admitted Jim, but immediately qualified the concession with, "for those who happen to like marble images."

Ciceley made no reply. Her hurt expression deepened into something touched with anger. Into the man's mind flashed a phrase of Julia's letter, "I am so proud of Wick!" Was it a necessity for all mothers to be blind? And was Julia's "pride" of the same touch-me-not, sensitive-plant variety as Ciceley's? A dull resentment against the whole race of mothers drove Jim more recklessly into disparagement.

"It wasn't whether your girls are pretty or not, Sis, that I was thinking. It's their selfishness with regard to you. Of course you've spoiled them, — I suppose that was natural; but they're old enough now to have a little sense of their own. The very way they speak to you makes me mad. They're regular young —"

He sat upright, and let his eyes travel meaningfully upward until they rested upon the bronze medallion over the front door, where internally the mother-pelican bared her torn breast to her rapacious fledglings.

Ciceley flung him an indignant half-glance then, turned her head, keeping her face rigidly averted.

"Now, Sis," placated the offender, seeing that he had gone too far. "You mustn't get mad. I didn't mean —"

"It is not worth getting mad about. Only, I sometimes wonder at the blindness and ignorance of the people who call themselves my friends."

Coolly she met his astonished gaze. It seemed another Ciceley. Was everything, to-day, being turned upside down?

"I have noticed," she pursued relentlessly, "that it is always those with no children of their own, — Old Mrs. Rogers, Mammy Nycie, and you, who have the most to say about mine. If you'd try to help and encourage me a little, instead of merely criticising what you cannot possibly understand —" She paused on a note that matched her lifted eyebrows.

Jim, after all, was human. "I have tried to help — just a little," said he. Again Rover turned questioning eyes.

Ciceley maintained her chill stare a moment longer. The big, familiar figure was huddled now deep into its hickory chair. The head and eyelids were lowered, and one hand, holding the old pipe, hung over a chair-arm limply. The attitude bespoke utter defencelessness. A swift compunction seized his tormenter, and there was a thrill of tenderness in the voice that cried, "Forgive me, Jim! I'm ashamed of myself. I didn't mean it. You have been everything, *everything*, to my fatherless girls!"

Jim's gloomy face betrayed no answering rapture.

"Why, you dear Jim," she hurried on, insistent now upon his virtues, "none of us could have even kept alive but for you. The splendid price you got for that old Sand Town tract, when everybody said it was worthless, — and then the way you invested the money for us! It was wonderful!"

Jim writhed as if in bodily anguish, and dropped his pipe. Perhaps it was the stooping for it that made his face so swift and deep a crimson.

In lifting his head, he caught her gaze more fairly. She was leaning toward him, a hint of gold between brown wings that quivered apart in pleading.

"Jim, Jim! Say that you forgive me. I know I am not myself when anything is said about the girls. Jim!" this last in a sort of wail, for his look had not softened. "You couldn't be really angry with me for long!"

Jim made a sound, half groan, half sigh. "No, Sis, you are right, I couldn't."

"Then we can begin all over again, and play I never said it!" she cried, affecting a sprightliness and composure that she was far from feeling. "I've got something funny, — something really awfully queer that I've been wanting to tell you."

He made no response. She caught her breath at this, but forced her bright tone into saying, "Guess who I've been thinking about to-day?"

"The pelicans, of course!" growled Jim, and immediately felt better.

"No. Not the pelicans," she laughed, determined, for her part, on being generous. "It's somebody far, far away from us."

A premonition of the truth caught him. He sat suddenly upright. Good Lord! Had she already dug out his secret! Women were witches of intuition, and no mistake! Because it was the last name he should have mentioned, and the one his saner self strove, even now, most desperately to withhold, some demon of malice spoke out clearly. "Not Jule!"

Ciceley nodded. "Exactly — Jule."

The hairs on the back of Jim's neck stiffened. He clenched his teeth against the possibility of further betrayal, but, to his surprise Ciceley was accepting without astonishment or question the seeming miracle of telepathy.

"I hadn't really thought about Jule for months," the speaker went on confidently, "and all at once this morning —"

"This morning!"

"Why, yes, quite early. I was in the room with the girls, helping them dress to go into town."

Her wide, candid eyes questioned the incredulity of his.

"All right. It's nothing. Go on," he muttered, slouching back to his former position.

"Just when they had finished and I stood looking at them, it came over me, all at once, how much I longed for Jule, so that she could see them too. They never were — nicer," added Ciceley in a fatuous, if slightly appealing afterthought.

Jim grunted.

"She used to write to me real often," continued the speaker, ignoring tactfully the unsympathetic sound. "I did love to get Jule's letters."

"Did you love 'em enough to answer 'em?"

Ciceley hung her head. Jim watched her from the corner of an eye. "Thank heaven!" was now his inward ejaculation, "I've sidetracked her!" But his relief was short. "Do you always answer Jule's letters?" came as if from a shotgun.

"Me! What!" gasped Jim. "What ever made you think she wrote to me?"

"Why, naturally she does. Do you want to keep it a secret?"

There, she had spoken it, "secret." She had used the very word which since early morning had fretted his honest soul like a bit of thistle in the throat. He might have known he was no match for a woman. Flight alone remained. He attempted to rise, fell back, and finally got to his feet so heavily that Rover sprang up barking, and Ciceley stared in unfeigned astonishment. Jim's gaze met hers, only to be caught away.

Now Ciceley too sprang up. A prescient thrill sped between them, turning her cold. He could see through the deepening gloom, — for night was falling rapidly, — how the two small hands, clutching at each other, went up tightly against her breast. The white oval of her face was a rose-petal, drifting upon the darkness. Almost he knew its fragrance.

Instinctively he hurried toward her, while she as instinctively cowered back, flinging out a hand to keep him off. The look, the gesture, each so eloquent of what she had begun to fear, set a quick torch to longings never in her presence completely under rein.

An instant before there had been in his thoughts no hint of freeing such words as now surged through him, battering for egress at the gateway of his lips. A flame had suddenly leaped up from nowhere. Love and a new hope were scorching him.

"No, no!" cried out a woman's voice, fear-touched to a high and ringing sweetness. "You promised, Jim; you promised!"

Her tone pierced the last barrier of self-control. "I know I did, Sis. But I'm going to break that promise."

"You mustn't Jim. You said you would never hurt me by speaking this way again. I've trusted you."

"It's not your trust I want. It's love, it's you! Oh, Ciceley, how long will you keep me waiting? It has been you and you only all of my life! Does that count in your heart as nothing?"

Ciceley, shrinking farther, covered her face with both hands.

"Don't you see, Sis," he urged, the first flare of his passion sinking down into tenderness, "that you need me almost as much as I need you? The girls are getting beyond you. Think what I could be in helping you with them."

"I do, Jim," she whispered. "It is of them only that I am thinking. My life belongs to them."

"It wouldn't belong to them any the less if you married me."

"You don't understand," she moaned. "It would be different. They would resent my putting any one else before them — or even — You know what I mean — I can't seem to find the right words. You

help me now, dear Jim. I've told you so. Why can't you be satisfied with things as they are?"

"Good Lord!" said the man, as if speaking out to the night. "And she asks me that!"

"I — I — care for you, Jim — more than anything or anybody in the world, next to my girls. You believe that, don't you?"

"Then give me a little real happiness in my life before it is too late."

At this she shook her head. "It's too late now for what you mean. We're past that time, Jim, you and I."

"Speak for yourself," cried Jim, pain making his voice loud and rough. "I'm not! And in my eyes you're just as sweet and pretty as you ever were."

Ciceley, letting her two hands fall, smiled faintly. She was terribly, terribly sorry for Jim, but after all it was his own fault for keeping up this silly attitude. The pleadings of impassioned love did not belong to middle-aged friends who might justly be supposed to have outgrown their youthful ardors. There was something about it hinting of the ridiculous. Come to think of it, Jim was distinctly unkind to break his promises of silence and cause her to feel so self-conscious and absurd.

Jim had been watching her. The small face was still pallidly vague, but, knowing her as he did, each movement of shoulders, head, and hands, was filled with meaning.

"You feel perfectly sure, then, that you are never, under any circumstances, going to be willing to marry me?"

Ciceley hesitated the fraction of a second, then stated firmly, "I am sure, Jim."

He was silent and motionless for so long that a faint alarm assailed her. The little gray shawl had fallen. She stooped for it, wrapping herself slowly with absent-minded precision.

"Jim!"

He made no answering sound. A tiny shiver, born of the chill night, ran through her. She stepped closer.

"Jim!"

"Yes, Sis."

"You won't change to me because of this?" There was a lilt of anxious questioning in her tone. "You will be my very best friend — always? And — and — you won't let it make any difference to — poor Henry's children?"

"Don't worry," he said to her quietly, after a moment's pause. "It isn't going to make any difference to poor Henry's children." Ciceley started at the note of bitterness. Was it really good old Jim who spoke in such a voice? Rover whined softly, brushing against his master's knees. For once he was ignored.

Ciceley involuntarily stooped down. Her hand caressed the dog's head as she said plaintively, "And not to me either, Jim. I couldn't bear for any real difference to come between you and me. Why, you are my big brother, my counsellor, my friend, — *everything!*"

At the last word, Jim gave a sort of grimace, meant for a smile. Then he drew himself very straight, and threw back his shoulders determinedly. "If it suits

you, all right! From now on, I'll remember. You shall not be bothered again, Sis."

Ciceley smiled up at him with a look not unlike that of a mother who encourages the somewhat vain-glorious boasting of a small son. Her lips murmured a few grave words of appreciation, but unfortunately, at one of the corners, a betraying dimple played.

Jim caught its shy twinkle. A flush of hurt pride, tinged with anger, made his cheeks burn. So it still seemed a joke to Ciceley!

"You think that I won't!" he flung out. "You think I'll break this as I have all the others. Well, you're mistaken! A man can't eat dirt all his life. This time it's a promise to me — to what's left of my own self-respect; and by the Lord Harry, this time it is going to be kept!"

CHAPTER SIX

THE PELICANS

CICELEY withdrew her caresses from Rover. She like Jim, stood up straight. Her lips parted in amazement, still tinged just a little with incredulity. That he meant it this time, or thought that he meant it, was not to be doubted.

Against the deepening night his bulk loomed, a figure of bronze. The dog now drew back, changing into a bronze dog that set hard, watchful eyes upon her. The air began draining away, leaving the space thin and cold.

She gave a short, nervous laugh. She had asked for this thing. All along she had believed herself to have desired it, but now, being given, it brought a queer feeling of loss.

Jim had turned to descend. "No, wait, Jim," she cried, on an impulse. The man hesitated. "I can't let you go like this," she faltered. "I — Jim — wait! There's something —"

Through the vacuum of embarrassed silence, as from a world very far away, came the rumble of a trolley-car climbing the slope of the Hill. For Ciceley it

was as if a troubled dream were pricked by a sudden waking.

"There's the car!" she announced quite unnecessarily, "I knew it was just about time. The girls are sure to be on it!"

Entirely herself once more, she ran to the top step, poised in her attitude of expectancy. Her eager, outward gaze was fixed in the direction of the gate. Jim had become no more than one of the empty verandah chairs.

For the second time in his honest, genial life, the man knew the savor of a great bitterness. Only a few moments before he had snapped with his own hands, as it were, and at this woman's will, the last filament of hope that held him to a personal joy. It was his final sacrifice. To her it meant apparently little more than riddance of a thorn.

He stepped down quickly. "Oh, Jim," she protested, catching at his shoulder, "don't go like this. Besides," she added brightly, knowing well her power over him, "I want you to help me light the lamps."

He wrenched himself from her touch, but she ignored the unfriendly gesture, and hurried back into the house.

"Jim," rose her plaintive voice a moment later, "come here. I can't reach up to this tall piano lamp."

With something as near a shrug as he had ever managed to attain, Jim went in, followed reluctantly by Rover.

Together he and Ciceley lighted all the lamps. Mammy Nycie had evidently overlooked them. In her reaction from the crisis just passed, Ciceley had

swung into a mood of animation, touched with an underlying excitement. In moving about the room, she kept up an incessant flow of conversation. It was as if she fought off a new menace of silence.

"You see, Jim, I was specially anxious to-day, because the girls had gone out to a luncheon on that big battleship that is in the harbor now. Of course I knew there couldn't be any real danger on such a big boat, and with all the sailors trained to keep visitors from falling overboard; but, somehow, I just can't outgrow a feeling of terror when I know that Sylvia and Lucille are on the water." Here she broke in upon her monologue to demand of him eagerly, "Isn't that the car, stopping down at the corner?"

"Yes, quite a long stop," answered Jim from the doorway. "There's a whole bunch getting off."

"I'm glad the old room looks so tidy," self-congratulated Ciceley, glancing about her with a smile. "Mammy Nycie and I gave it a thorough cleaning only this morning. Of course the old furniture is pretty shabby," she conceded. "But then," brightening, "flowers make a lot of difference, don't they?"

She went over to the old-fashioned square piano to finger lovingly a great bowl of yellow roses. Her small face, turned backward over the gray crocheted shawl, pleaded for confirmation of the statement.

Jim, with head rigid, answered gruffly "Yes", supplementing the laconic utterance with the remark, "Well, I reckon Rover and I had better be trotting home."

This time Ciceley made no protest. She did not need him now that her idols were so near. Indeed, in her heart, she wished him to be gone; for not infrequently of late, he and Lucille had, as he expressed it, "locked horns."

"Good night, then, if you must," said his hostess pleasantly, extending a somewhat oily hand.

"Good night," responded Jim dully.

Through the night, as the two hands met, came from the stirrup latch a loud, clear stroke, followed immediately by a second.

"Hello! What's that?" cried the man. "Sounds like a signal!"

"It is — a sort of one," said Ciceley, laughing a little nervously. "You see — the girls and I —" she went on, "we have lots of private signs. This one — it really isn't anything —" she broke off in obvious confusion.

Jim did not relax his puzzled frown. "It was a signal, then?"

"It is nothing. I've told you it was nothing," she reiterated, with an edge of sharpness. "Good night."

The gate could be heard to slam. Again resounded two crisp detonations, carefully spaced.

Jim's curiosity and stubbornness sprang simultaneously to the fore.

"If it is nothing, why should you look scared to death? Those girls are up to some mischief, and I am going to stay right here until I find out what it is."

"You mustn't, Jim. Please don't. I have told

you that it is something between the girls and me."

"And therefore," he added grimly, "none of my business."

"I didn't say that. How can you be so unkind?"

Jim waved aside the implication of malevolence. "As far as you are personally concerned, I'll admit my hands are tied. But—" here he regarded her steadily, "you forget how recently you urged me to keep up my interest in poor Henry's children."

Ciceley was on the verge of tears. She looked up imploringly, her eyes luminous with their sheen. Jim set his teeth. The sound of laughter and young voices without drew close.

"Well, if you must know," cried she, striving desperately to conserve an air of sprightliness, "those two raps are a sign that the girls have strangers with them. It is to give me time."

"Time!" stared Jim. "Time for what?"

"Oh, you old stupid! Time to get out of the way, of course. There, they are at the bottom of the steps. Let's hurry into the dining room." By this a white panic was on her upturned face.

Jim reached out and caught her firmly by the arm. "You are not going to stir an inch. This is your house, and this is the place for you to receive your daughters' guests."

"You don't understand!" she wailed. "Let me go, Jim. Please let me go! Lucille will be furious."

Jim's taut lips stiffened. Nothing is quite so brutalizing as pain; and the man, through his suffering, found a sort of grim satisfaction in persistence. The

truth of the situation had begun to dawn. He had long suspected that Ciceley was in actual fear of her elder daughter. Now he was sure of it. "Perhaps I don't understand," he granted harshly. "But I'm going to, and that mighty soon."

For an instant she drooped, only to rouse herself to a new and more desperate defiance.

"Release me at once, Jim. Do you hear?" she commanded, struggling in his hold. "You must have gone out of your senses to act this way! I want to get out of the room before they come. I haven't dressed since morning. I am not fit to receive guests."

"You received me."

"Oh, you!" The angry laugh was vibrant with scorn. Then again her eyes turned fearfully toward the door. "They are on the steps. Release my arm, Jim Roy, or I shall never forgive you!"

For answer he merely tightened his relentless grasp.

By this, Rover, who had been cowering at a little distance, sprang up, and, hearing the voices without, rushed toward them, barking frantically.

A girlish squeal followed by bright laughter told that little Sylvia was trying to beat the dog away.

In a moment came the clear, beautifully modulated tones of Lucille. "It's only Rover. He won't bite. That means — Uncle Jim." The name was given with an intonation of impatience.

"The icy mitt for Uncle Jim, whoever he may be," responded a boyish, laughing voice, unknown to the straining ears within.

Ciceley stood now apparently passive; but every fiber of her slender body ached with rage.

Little Sylvia rushed in. "Mother!" she warned in a breathless whisper, "didn't you hear the signal? We've brought two naval officers home."

"What of it? They won't bite your mother, will they?" demanded Colonel Jim, with an ogre's glare.

"Oh," faltered Sylvia, backing swiftly, "of course they won't. Only Lucille —"

"Lucille! Where is she? Tell her that Mrs. Dering is waiting to receive her and her companions, here in the drawing-room," ordered Jim, in a stentorian voice.

Lucille entered, her golden head high in air. Hers was the kind of anger that steadies and burns cold. Her face was white flint. Behind her, following uncertainly, came the young officers.

Conventional presentations were made, in which Ciceley, who, after all, was integrally an aristocrat, had little difficulty in finding pleasant words and even, once or twice, a smile. The young men, horribly if vaguely embarrassed, were overwhelming in the cordiality of their responses. Only Colonel Jim, standing apart, was like a cliff with a black cloud on its summit. The air was charged as if before a thunderstorm; and it was with a heart sick with its longing to escape that Ciceley took advantage of the first courteous opportunity.

Blindly she groped her way toward the dining room. She was not clearly conscious of direction, only to get away, somewhere — somewhere — to herself!

In the old room, which was indeed the chief living nook of the entire household, no light but the dull flicker of logs was seen. A sense of gratefulness toward the friendly semi-darkness touched her like a comforting hand. Now, if the others would leave her to herself; if only they would not follow!

Stifling something like a sob, she ran toward the familiar hearth. For an instant she paused here, lifting her eyes toward her husband's portrait, hanging above. The fire-gleam did not reach it. Even the picture had deserted her.

Now, all at once, she realized how she was trembling. Stretching her hand toward a chair, she grasped the back, and was at the point of collapse when the single word "Mother!" stinging like a whiplash, startled her back to rigidity.

"What is the meaning of this — this — pe-cu-liar — exhibition?" asked Lucille, drawling contemptuously upon the adjective.

The tone of the words, rather than their content, spread like an eating acid over Ciceley's heart.

"I cannot talk about it now, Lucille. I am all upset. See how my hands are shaking! Go back to your guests, please."

"Sylvia is in the parlor. I do not care to postpone what I have to say."

"I'm really ill, Lucille. I am not able —"

"It's not to be wondered at," commented the girl, with a sneer. "Of course Uncle Jim, with some of his ridiculous ideas, put you up to this!"

At the mention of Jim's name, the badgered woman, not realizing that she did so, sent an imploring look

toward the big leathern chair known as his. The established place for Uncle Jim was at the corner of the hearth, just opposite. In the instinctive glance she had had no thought except to find it empty. With the sense of a miraculous happening, she perceived that the big figure had come in noiselessly, and, quite as usual, preëmpted its sanctioned niche. Terror sank down before this bulwark of defence.

At the swift change in her mother's face, Lucille, off guard, wheeled around. The voice was less restrained which challenged sharply, "This affair is entirely between my mother and myself, Uncle Jim!"

Jim, smiling pleasantly, took out his pipe, and proceeded to stuff it. Rover, at peace once more, curled himself close about his master's feet.

Lucille took her underlip between her teeth. The beautiful, hard face grew, if possible, more bloodless.

"You insist, then, upon remaining?"

Jim drew a match along his trouser leg, and calmly applied it to his pipe.

"Come to my room, Mother," ordered the girl. "Perhaps —" she paused to send a triumphant glance toward Jim — "we shall be allowed privacy there."

"Stay exactly where you are, Sis," countermanded the Colonel. "And," he added, "you'd better sit down."

Ciceley obeyed him quickly. She did not dare to look toward Lucille. For years the girl's strong will and latent violence had dominated her household group. Before the first symptom of "one of Lucille's tantrums", as covertly they were termed,

Ciceley and little Sylvia invariably fled. Only old Mammy Nycie, goaded beyond the limits of African constraint, had ventured now and again to fight the rising flames. With each encounter Lucille, needless to say, had emerged victorious.

Now had appeared in the open this new, but long suspected antagonist. "Well," thought the girl, "I've seen it coming, and I might as well have it over here and now." The prospect had, for her, no terrors. The high-bred nostrils, scenting battle, quivered with a pleasurable excitement. Besides, the Colonel's weakest spot — his heart — had long been to her an open book. It was here that she would strike.

From the drawing-room came intermittently snatches of Sylvia's nervous laughter and the murmur of masculine voices striving for heartiness and unconcern. Lucille, still standing, moved her head slightly in that direction, and appeared to hesitate.

The two figures seated, one at each side of her, watched every motion, — Ciceley with wide-eyed apprehension, the Colonel furtively, out of the corner of one eye.

Suddenly the girl gave a low laugh. The abruptness of it was uncanny. It had the sound of water under ice. Ciceley with difficulty stifled a cry.

"Mammy Nycie is growing very careless," remarked Lucille, letting her calm gaze rest upon the unlighted lamps. "Shall I light them, Mother?"

Not pausing for reply, the girl went first directly up to the Colonel. "Any matches, Uncle Jim? Ours are never in place."

He handed her a box in silence, but when the slim, almost boyish back was turned, followed it with puzzled eyes. Ciceley, noting the perplexity, felt her own fears rush in anew.

"There," cried Lucille. "That's better, isn't it?" From the two old-fashioned burners, on the sideboard, a swift radiance possessed the room. "Now we can see each other better as we talk."

Ciceley's small hands clenched beneath the shabby shawl. Even the Colonel felt something within him beginning to turn cold, as the young figure, confident, moving in careless grace, retraced deliberate steps toward the hearth.

Smiling, she drew a chair forward, seating herself between her two companions. There was a fleck of something, — probably a mark from Rover's welcoming paw, — on her dark blue skirt, near the crossed knees. This she brushed off with feminine, deft touches, her shining head tilted first to one side and then the other. When satisfied with the result, she suddenly, without warning, lifted her gaze to Jim. Instinctively he started. He could have cursed himself for the default.

"It has just occurred to me, Uncle Jim," began she, in a voice treacherously sweet, "that perhaps I am being kept in ignorance."

"I am no guesser of riddles," gruffly rejoined the man to this amazing prologue. What, in heaven's name, was the girl driving at?

"It was you, I feel sure, who prevented mother from leaving."

"It was."

"Who literally forced her to remain, looking as she did — as she does," added the clear voice sneeringly, with a glance toward her mother that sent the small figure cowering deeper in its chair.

"Your mother's place is in the drawing-room! You girls have no right to try to shove her off, as if — as if — It's the most outrageous thing I ever heard of!" vociferated the Colonel, gathering heat.

"Will you kindly refrain from shouting, there are still guests in mother's drawing-room." Her words were the snapping of icicles.

"I am only trying to understand," she continued smoothly. "This move on your part is so very — revolutionary — I feel that at last mother must have given you the right to interfere."

Jim, for an instant, could only gasp. So this was it! She had dared to aim at the core of his heart, his love for Ciceley, with her poisoned arrows!

"Lucille, Lucille! What are you saying!" came a cry from the huddled figure at her other side.

The girl seemed not to hear. Her eyes triumphed over Jim. No one not well acquainted with her could have suspected that she was fast losing self-control.

"If," she pursued, with just a touch of shrillness, "what I suspect is true, allow me to be the first to offer my congratulations."

Before malignity so deep, so unashamed, Jim's anger died. A sort of hopeless grief replaced it. The blow dealt to himself was less of a calamity than the fact that Ciceley's child had given it. Poor little Sis! No wonder she had been afraid!

It was with a restraint and dignity far more disconcerting to Lucille than the expected flare of rage that he made his quiet answer.

"If you are trying to find out whether your mother has honored me by consenting to be my wife, it is easily told. She has not. Only a few moments before you returned she finally refused me. But in doing so, she asked me, in the name of our lifelong friendship, not to give up my interest or my legal guardianship in my dead cousin's children. How much your mother needs assistance, I'm just beginning to learn. No, don't try to stop me. It's no use, I have a few things yet to say. I suspected something wrong when I heard that sweet little signal of yours on the stirrup latch. I stayed deliberately and against your mother's will just to find out. Well" — here he drew a deep breath, with a sort of shudder in it — "I've found out, all right! And let me tell you, Lucille, that this side of a Red Indian torturing white babies, your conduct is about the most savage and unnatural that human depravity can show. You ought to be tied to a whipping post!"

The big room filled with a terrifying silence. Lucille, shivering in all her slender body, strove in vain for speech. None of the three had taken cognizance of a more definite stir in the adjoining drawing-room.

Now Sylvia, thrusting her head in at a partly opened door, summoned Lucille in a whisper. "Come back in here, Lucille. They are both going."

"Let them go!" said Lucille, through set teeth.

Sylvia vanished, but her appearance had in some way broken, for the elder girl, the ban of inarticula-

tion. Infuriated phrases broke from her lips, and tossed themselves in utterance. A frenzy of abandonment caught her. For the first time in all her sheltered life, she gave the open road to violence.

"Yes, they have gone!" she panted. "Why shouldn't they? Men of the world soon learn to shun a house like this! Hayseeds, and country bumpkins are the kind we cater to! They feel at home here, in a ramshackle barn, falling to pieces with old age. They never notice that our mother looks like a servant. Look at her now," raged the girl, pointing a shaking finger. "Do you suppose that if she ever did anything but shrivel up and cry, I'd be talking to her like this! Sylvia's another! But I've managed to put a little spirit into her kittenish soul. We have both asked mother to keep up appearances a little better, but she will not listen. She says she is too old. Well, if she's too old, let her keep out of the way of those who are not."

Ciceley, stung at last into self assertion, got to her feet. "Be silent, Lucille. You shall not speak to me in such a way."

"And how are you going to prevent it?" the demon in Lucille began, when Jim, who had also risen, strode up directly in front of her, saying, "Be silent."

From the doorway, where unseen by the others little Sylvia had again made her appearance, the sound of stifled sobbing came. Jim, insensate to the little one's terror, cried out to her, "Come here!"

She drew nearer, weeping openly, like the child she was.

"Are you too, like Lucille, ashamed of your own mother?"

"Oh, Uncle Jim — no — *no!*"

"You are a liar, Sylvia," said the elder girl. "You have told me so a dozen times."

"Jim, Jim!" came the cry of the mother, "I cannot bear any more!"

He wheeled just in time to prevent Ciceley from sinking to the floor. For an instant he held her close. She strained against him, her whole racked body clamoring for his strength. "All right, little Sis," he said, thinking her most poignant wish to be for his absence, "I'll go."

"One minute, Jim," she gasped. "Don't leave me." His heart gave a single leap, then quivered back into steadiness.

"I'm here as long as you need me, Sis. I'll tell you what!" he exclaimed, trying to speak brightly. "Before I go, suppose I see you to your room!"

The head against his shoulder nodded acquiescence. He caught her up as if she had been a child. "Same corner room?"

Again she nodded, at which Jim, throwing his head well back, carried her past the astounded girls and up the wide staircase, not pausing until her door was reached.

"Got any key?" he asked, setting her down.

"No, but I think there's a bolt inside," she told him, using the smothered accents of a conspirator.

"Well, shoot it, and keep it shot. And in the morning" — here, seeing her wince, he took both icy hands in his, moving them playfully up and down —

"things always look much better in the morning."

She tried to give an answering smile, but her eyes were still imploring. At that moment some instinct told him that by the urging he could have what he had coveted so long. Again came the heart-leap. "No!" said he to it sternly. There was a certain pride, a tender bigness in the man, that held him. Not in reaction from a scene like this would he win her.

"Good night, dear little Sis. God bless you."

"Good night, dear Jim."

She closed the door reluctantly.

"I'm waiting to hear that bolt," he said.

Ciceley gave a little sob, and the bolt slid, creaking, into place.

Jim strode heavily down-stairs. The girls were standing exactly where he had left them. Shaking a fist first in one young face and then the other, he said with savage earnestness, "If either of you young pelicans *dare* to bother that poor heart-broken little mother again to-night, I'll come over here and skin you alive with my own hands."

CHAPTER SEVEN

JIM'S TELEPHONE RINGS

As a sword-blade snatched from fire is thrust into tempering oil, so Jim, making his escape from Little Sunshine, plunged into the cooling night. Almost he expected to hear himself hiss.

The dog, vaguely perturbed, followed.

Once in the grateful darkness, the Colonel's twitching lips went wide, drinking the clean air; his head was thrown far back. "God!" he cried out, and let the word shudder away into silence. Somehow, because of his personal share in Ciceley's humiliation, he felt betrayed, — in some curious way dishonored. In spite of his threats of flagellant reproof, he had been conscious all along of personal impotence. Ciceley had cast off the one life belt which he had to throw. Her daily existence, unless some help from within could be given, must continue to be subjection to an unnatural tryanny.

"If it were only Lucille!" said the Colonel to himself, finding a sort of safety valve in speech. "But the little one too is absolutely in her power. Lucille's got both of them just where she wants them. Lord!"

It was through the "little one", he knew, that

Ciceley's deepest hurt could come. She was marvellously like Ciceley, a sort of radiant incarnation of the mother's youth.

But the other! Here the Colonel's teeth rasped audibly. Lucille was Dering through and through! Her eyes, with their cool, devilish challenge, might have been Henry's eyes as he announced his easily-won triumph over Jim, with the girl Ciceley.

Jim's hand struck sideways at the tree-trunk nearest. The pain of the blow was a relief. He rushed forward and, gaining an open space, paused. Under the crowding trees he had felt damp suffocation. Now he could see the sky, and the heat of his tormented soul rose in an escaping flame. The early autumn night had spread to a remote, uniform blue-gray, the color of an old granite slab in a churchyard. The stars pricked through in hard, bright points. To the west, just over a continuous silhouette of pines, hung, by its invisible thread, a sharp new moon. The tilt of its chin was Lucille's chin as she had said, "*Look* at her!" The Colonel turned his eyes away, and hurtled on.

At his own gate, Rover, having acquired a little courage by the way, ventured a "woof!" of satisfaction, and pushed his cold nose into his master's swinging palm.

"This is a hell of a world, Rover," groaned the man. The feel of the warm, shaggy head which he fondled brought his first throb of comfort. Together they paced down the center of the ink-black avenue. A feeble light burned from the house, — nearly a mile away, it seemed.

At the sound of Jim's heavy feet upon the steps, an answering shuffle within doors heralded the eager approach of Uncle Snow. One glance at the set face of "de Kunnel" was enough.

"Miss Ciceley done turnt him down ergin!" was the unerring intuition. In such affairs the old man made no mistakes. The voice, now lifted, matched his master's face in despairing gloom.

"Yo' supper's on de table, soon ez you wants it, Marse Jim."

"Any whiskey out?"

"No, sir, but I'll git a bottle," said Snow, retreating toward the sideboard. The "turning-down" this time, must have been unusually severe.

"Well, do it quick! And, Snow —"

"Yass, Marse Jim."

"Is there any reason why you should be so darned stingy with the lights?"

"Nossir."

"Light 'em all. And the fire, too."

The old man shambled about, making false starts, retracing steps, only to dive, with queer, sidewise motions, back along the same direction.

Jim strode up to him, snatching the whiskey bottle from his hands. Snow fell over himself on his precipitate way to the hearth.

"There isn't a sign of a glass on the table!" roared Jim. "Bring some water, too."

"Lord! Marse Jim," protested the old servant. "How kin I do ennything wid you bellowin' at me lak de Bull o' Bashum in de Bible? Does you want yo' fiah fust, or yo' water fust?"

"Bring the water," said Jim, beginning to be ashamed of his childish vehemence. "I'm all shot to pieces, Snow. You mustn't mind my bellowing."

Forcing himself back into self-control, he turned toward the table. At the far end of it, filling a segment absurdly small, were a "hunk" of cheese, a ham-bone that looked as if Rover had been gnawing it, some cold potatoes, and a few slices of bread. Jim gazed upon the meager outlay in disgust.

Old Snow brought in the glass and a small pitcher of water, and was making his way again toward the hearth when Jim checked him. "I've changed my mind about the fire. I'm hot enough. You can go now. I want to be alone."

"Yassur. But whar 'bout's is I gwinter go to?"

"The devil, for all I care! And don't come back in here to-night. Understand?"

"Yassur," admitted Snow, in a voice of tragedy. He had never seen Jim in so bitter a mood as this. Backing slowly toward the door of the butler's pantry, his mournful eyes upon his Master, he had just reached the lintel when the telephone, a black-box, wall affair hanging in the dining room just at the angle where old Snow now stood, rang with so sharp a suddenness, that both figures jumped.

Jim, in the act of pouring a stiff drink, rapped out a stiffer oath. The servant came to a halt. Without a glance in that direction, the Colonel, determined to ignore the interruption, continued to pour, and deliberately raised the glass to his lips.

Next to writing business letters, Jim hated to use a telephone. He spoke of it as a "necessary evil."

It got on his nerves with its arrogance. It was always so cockily sure of its prey.

Again came its shrill summons, extended this time to an exasperating length.

Jim took a second gulp. But Uncle Snow, firm in the discharge of what he felt to be his duty, said patiently, "Yo' telefoam is foamin', Marse Jim."

"What do you think I've got ears stuck to my head for, you old fool?" cried Jim, laughing in spite of himself. "Git out, or I'll —" The old negro ducked and ran.

"Hello! Hell — *low!*" Then, without pausing to listen, "Itsjimroywhatdoyouwant?" all in an angry breath.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed a feminine voice, a startled break in its bright merriment. "Are you as mad as all that?"

Jim could have sunk bodily through the polished floor.

"I beg your pardon, Ma'am," he managed to articulate. "I hadn't an idea it was a lady. There don't many ladies ring me up. I beg ten thousand pardons!"

"Jim," repeated the voice, now with a wonderful little thrill to it, "don't you know who it is?"

"Good God A'mighty," exploded Jim, again driven beyond the limits of decorum. "If it isn't Jule already! *Jule!*"

"Right-o!" rippled over the telephone. "When can I see you?"

"Where are you?"

"Down at the New Battle House, having hard chills of impatience."

"Well, I'll be —" murmured Jim, but was recalled dynamically by the sudden query, "Have you anything on for this evening?"

"Have I anything *on*?" gasped the Colonel, who had never chanced to hear this special form of social badinage. "Wha — wha — what in the world —"

Muffled but ecstatic sounds assailed him. "I don't mean clothes, you goose! Dates — engagements! Have you a previous engagement for this evening, Mr. James Roy?"

"Oh," breathed Jim in absurd relief. "No, I haven't."

"Then you are to take the very next car for town. Don't bother to ask for me at the desk. I'll give orders that you are to be shown up at once. Hurry!"

"Well, I'll be —" again said the man helplessly.

"Here, Jule. Hold on!" he protested, nearly tearing the receiver-hook from its socket. But before an answer could come, he put it back.

Taking out his watch, he saw that a car was nearly due. In a sort of daze, he went into the big hallway where on a rack of antlers hung various battered hats, with coats of a kindred shabbiness. It was characteristic of the man that not once did he think of his personal appearance. His was a singularly direct and uncomplex mind, harboring, by preference, one object at a time. Now it was Jule, the dear old Jule of his boyhood days, so close, after all these years. And Jule had wanted to see him first of all!

Even the poignancy of Ciceley's trouble faded a

little in the excitement of this new interest. And yet the radiance might be said to have a fitful glow. The vision of Ciceley's stricken face peered now and again from impinging shadows.

Suddenly he recalled what she had said of her personal longing for Jule. What if the need had risen from something deeper than, as he had fancied, a mere telepathic hint from him? In the old days there had been few perplexities, — those trivial disagreements and oppositions that loom so portentously before the eyes of inexperience, — which Julia's keen insight and good judgment had been unable to unravel.

"And, after all," said Jim to himself, in pursuance of this comforting reflection, "the sort of a fix poor Sis has gotten herself into doesn't need a man's help so much as that of an older and wiser woman, just like Jule."

By this he had caught up a hat and assumed the first pendent coat that chanced to meet his careless hand. Rover, all eager anticipation and waving tail, prepared to follow. "Nothing doing, old sport," cruelly remarked his master, at which the humbled beast, with an oblique look of protest, turned and trotted down the long, dark hall in search of his companion in exile and ignominy, Uncle Snow.

During the long ride in, the Colonel, too restless to sit quietly, kept to his feet on the back platform of the car, pulling vigorously upon his pipe. With each jolt of diminishing distance, his agitation grew. It was no joke, come to think of it, — this meeting with a girl you were "raised with", after an absence

of years! Lord! How the times slid by! Only yesterday they were all out climbing trees, and now —! A little ruefully the big hand went up to graying temples. At least there was plenty of hair left. Julia had told him that she too was quite gray. He must nerve himself at showing consternation when they met. Probably she was fat also. Most of the middle-aged women he knew were fat. As the saying is, they had "let their figures go." Ciceley was a notable exception to this depressing rule, but then, of course, she would be. Ciceley did not belong to categories.

The lights of the town began to flash in passing. Now they were in the business district. In another two minutes they would reach the Battle House corner.

Jim, swinging off with the ease of a boy, faltered on the threshold of the wide, illuminated main entrance. The hotel, as such, was necessarily a familiar haunt. His Northern purchasers all stopped there, but if the lamentable truth must be spoken, Jim's previous visits had been made chiefly through a smaller and less conspicuous door, one on a side street bearing the brief but alluring word, "Bar." He cast a single wistful side look toward it now. The image of a highball, iced and sparkling, dangled in maddening allurements before his mental nose. The Colonel half closed his eyes, and wavered. If he dared! But no, Jule would certainly perceive it. Women had a sense of smell equal to dogs. He mustn't risk it, at least on this first meeting. So, squaring his broad shoulders, he told himself not to be a fool and marched defiantly within.

The countless electric lights of the rotunda immediately focussed upon him. In the relentless nucleus, he could feel himself growing small, and all in an instant he realized the shabbiness of his attire. He was glad that the hat, at least, was removable. He jerked it off, crushing it hard under his left arm.

Two agile bell-boys, resplendent in gilt-touched uniforms, sprang simultaneously toward him. He could have kicked them both. Now the chief clerk had seen him. Leaning confidentially across the curve of his marble-topped enclosure, he called, "Good-evening, Colonel. Fine weather we're having. Mrs. Preston wants you to be shown up-stairs at once. Elijah!" in a sharp, commanding tone to one of the grinning boys, "Show Colonel Roy to 515."

The hand that clutched the old felt hat gripped harder, and Jim followed the vibrant Elijah into the elevator. In the slow progress upward, the boy essayed ingratiating utterance. The Colonel did not pretend to listen, but he knew the tone. In absent-minded fashion he inserted two fingers into a waistcoat pocket, from which they emerged, clasp- ing, scissors-wise, a silver coin. Elijah delicately withdrew his gaze, but a slightly knitted brow betrayed mathematical calculation.

The Colonel's thoughts also were active, but not with sordid problems.

At the door of Number 515 the little negro, finding at last a tongue for gratitude, paused officiously, as if to assure himself that so beneficent a guest should receive proper welcome. This excellent intention,

however, scattered before the impatient words, "All right, 'Lijah. Now get out!"

Alone, the Colonel stood quite still a moment, then suddenly forced himself to give a vivacious knock.

Instantly, from the other side, came a low exclamation. He could not doubt the note of joy. The swish of silk came toward him; the knob turned; the door went wide; and a tall, slender woman, whom surely in all his life he had never seen before, smiled up, without speaking, into his astonished face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CICELEY AND THE "LITTLE EWE LAMB"

THE largest bedchamber of Little Sunshine, the one facing south and east, was occupied jointly by Ciceley's two daughters.

The open fireplace, almost as massive as the parlor one down-stairs, of which its great chimney was a continuance, jutted far out into the room, forming at each side a deep recess. In that nearest the one entrance door, had stood for years an enormous four-poster bed brought, as was most of the furniture, straight from England in Grandfather Dering's cotton ships. It still possessed the faded draperies of old peacock chintz, a round, stiff bolster, and in winter a voluminous feather mattress, little Sylvia's special joy. The mother's room, just opposite, across a dark, bare hall, was smaller and more plainly furnished.

During the years of their childhood the girls had slept together in the huge bed, but recently Lucille, having become interested in a series of articles on modern Hygiene had declared companionship and feather mattresses alike unsanitary.

Although each unforeseen encroachment upon her

scanty income caused Ciceley sleepless nights, wondering how on earth she was to "manage it", the determined Lucille insisted upon ordering for herself a small iron bed, spotlessly enameled, and with it a new and expensive mattress of fiber. This she had placed in the farther alcove, directly beside a window. Fresh air, exercise, and diet had become a passion with the tall girl; and though already she was as white and slim and exquisite as a newly opened annunciation lily, the treatment seemed, in truth, to add new loveliness.

Little Sylvia, who feared the dark and hated to sleep alone, wept bitterly at first over this desertion. She even threatened to go in and share her mother's bed. Ciceley's heart, at this suggestion, had given a throb of joy. Her lips parted in eagerness to second it, when a curt, decisive "Don't be silly, Sylvia" from the elder daughter put a swift end to hope.

So the little one, curled like a kitten in a particularly fluffy tea-cosey, remained the sole tenant of a bed that could have held a dozen like her; and Lucille, heroically pillowless, carefully keeping always those postures commended by modern science, dreamed her long, quiet dreams alone.

On the morning following the dreadful scene in the dining room, Sylvia awoke unusually early. Her first conscious thought was a stab of guilt that she could have slept at all. She sat up instantly, listening to hear if Lucille stirred. From the narrow bed came not even the sound of breathing. Cautiously the little one climbed down, lowering herself by degrees over the edge of a warm, feathery cliff. The

chill of morning caught at her bare ankles; and, as the pink toes touched the floor, they curled spasmodically. "Ugh!" broke in a stifled cry from their owner's lips.

Once safely down, she began to dress quickly. Another restriction lately imposed by Lucille was that all their articles of clothing should not only be kept in different bureaus, but that the bureaus themselves should stand as far apart as the given space allowed.

"I do wish, Sylvia," was a frequent expostulation, uttered generally in a tone of patient hopelessness, "that you would ever learn to keep your things in your own part of the room!"

The little one, usually restless and inwardly protestive against such discipline, found herself, for once, in keen accord with it. The whole process of dressing, even to the taking from its allotted hook of her old red sweater, had been accomplished well without Lucille's line of vision. Still unseen and presumably unheard, she slipped through the door, and went across the hall to that of her mother.

A soft turning of the knob, followed by a push, told her that the inexorable bolt had not been withdrawn. She ventured the softest of raps, and stood for a moment, hoping. The room within was even stiller than the one she had just quitted. With a shake of the brown head, and a little sigh of disappointment, she tiptoed along the hall and down the stairway.

The lower floor of the house was cold and somehow amazingly desolate. It was evident that Mammy had not yet been in. Sylvia opened the back door, and,

with an audible gasp at the chill, misty breath of morning, ran along an old flagstone walk toward the warmth and comfort of the kitchen.

The old stove purred and trembled with the fervor of a recently created fire. Mammy Nycie, the dusky goddess of this humble realm, stood at a pine board table, kneading biscuit dough. She did not turn her head as Sylvia entered. "Mammy!" shivered the girl, nearing a large brown elbow, "Mammy, I'm freezing!"

"What's got de matter wid yo' bed, all of a sudden?" demanded Mammy unkindly.

"Nothing. Only I couldn't stay in it. I don't see how I ever went to sleep! I'm so worried, Mammy. It's — it's — Mother."

Mammy flung down the moist dough with a snap, and, wheeling ponderously, planted a huge, closed fist upon each rotund hip. "An' Gawd knows hit's erbout time *one* uf you wuz beginnin' to think about yo' mudder," she burst out. Then, with a tone of almost primitive passion, "What you gals gone done to my baby?"

Sylvia cowered into a chair. "It wasn't me did anything!" she protested.

"Hit's all de same. What Lucille does, you do!" vociferated Mammy. "An' hit ain't Lucille all by hersef what's hurt her like she is hurt."

Sylvia's brown eyes fell.

"I didn't say nothin' las' night when I brought in yo' supper," Mammy went on more humanly. "I sensed dey wuz sumpin' I hatter find out fust. And whilst you two wuz stuffin' yo'selves —"

"I never ate one mouthful! I was crying all the time, and Lucille was eating and scolding me!" Sylvia broke in, stung to defence by the injustice.

"Whilst you wuz stuffin' yo'selves," resumed Mammy implacably, her large white eyeballs rolling menace to a second interruption, "I fixed up ez nice er little bait o' supper ez ennybody could fix, and took it up to my baby's do'. An' when I got to dat do' —" She paused dramatically. "Do you know what I foun'?"

"I know; it was locked!" said Sylvia, beginning to cry.

Mammy drew a long, deep breath. "Yes, hit wuz shet an' bolted. De fust time I knowed Miss Ciceley's do' had a bolt. Hit wuz shet against me, against her Mammy, what done love an' nuss her sence de day she wuz bawn. And when I seen dat —" again she paused, and let a hostile glance fall on the culprit, "I knowed dat somethin' mo' dan onery sassiness had tukken place wid her."

"Did you ever get in?" questioned the little one. "I tried — twice — after Lucille was asleep — but —"

"Did I ebber git in!" snorted the old woman. "Me! I wasn't gwineter leave until I did. When Miss Ciceley didn't answer, I jes' nachally told her thoo de keyhole dat I was gwineter bust dat do' into kindlin' wood!"

Sylvia stared up in wonder and admiration at such prowess, but Mammy was not yet to be conciliated.

"When you got in," whispered Sylvia, "what — how did mother seem? Did she —"

"She wuz standin' jes' inside," said Mammy, watching almost cruelly to see the effect of her words. "Her po' little han's wuz helt up crost her, lak dis." The narrator clutched huge, dough-splotched mahogany-colored hands across her breast, in illustration. "She jes' stood dare, wid her big eyes on me, er shakin' an' er shiv'in' lak a wild rabbit in er trap. When I sot down dat tray and thoo my arms eroun' her, she helt on tight, an' sez, 'Hole me close, Mammy — closer dan ever you did in all yo' life befo', ' she sez. 'Fer,' she sez, 'I think my heart is broke!'"

Long before the termination of this speech, little Sylvia's face had been covered. Now the slight figure in the old kitchen chair rocked to and fro, giving at each forward movement a little moan of suffering.

The old woman stared down gloomily. She was conscious of the satisfaction the picture brought. Yet the tousled brown head was terribly like that of the "baby" whose battle she was fighting. She steeled her kind heart against the hint of softness, and went on.

"An' when yo' maw sed dat," she emphasized, "I know'd only too well dat you is played some part in hit. Lucille is allays obstrep'rus. We don't expect nothin' mo'. But you! You an' yo' maw is lak David an' his little ewe lamb!"

"Oh, Mammy, Mammy!" the little one sobbed out. "Don't be mean to me any more. I can't stand it! Isn't there something I could do? Some way I could show mother that I was sorry? Won't you help me find a way?"

Mammy, apparently unrelenting, began to roll

out the biscuit dough. Sylvia, gathering sudden courage, put her small hand, quite brown by contrast, sheer in the middle of the cool, waxen surface.

"You've got to help me, Mammy. I am your baby, too, and I don't believe that even mother is any more miserable than I am right now."

Before this appeal and the brown eyes, Ciceley's own, lifted in an ecstasy of pleading, the last ferocious battlement of Mammy's rage went down. A sob rose in her throat, giving, when she spoke, a deep and vibrant sweetness to the words. "Honey," she said, looking down with eyes now suffused in tears, "hit's a bad thing to hurt enny heart ez tender an' lovin' as yo' maw, let erlone dat she *is* yo' maw."

"Oh, yes, yes! I know it is, Mammy. I am going to try never to hurt her again as long as I live."

"You ain't never gwineter pay no 'tention to dat sassy Lucille, even when she tries to egg you on?" bargained Mammy.

"No, I'm not! I will just think of mother. What can I do to show her, now!"

All at once the troubled black face broke into smiles of encouragement.

"I shouldn't be suprised," she began, her voice now matching her lightened expression, "ef a little waiter all fixed up wid a clean napkin — and one o' de purtiest china cups — an' some fresh, steamin' coffee —"

She needed to go no further. Sylvia, with rain-bows instead of tears on her long lashes, was halfway to the door. "I'll go and get the cup and napkin right away!" she cried, in transit.

With incredible promptitude she was back. "Is the coffee finished yet?" she interrogated, standing on tiptoe beside the stove in order to sniff at closer range the steam just issuing from a granite pot.

"Not yit," beamed Mammy. "An' dey is sugar in a little sugar-bowl, an' cream in dat littlest pitcher to be got. An' min' you be keerful 'bout skimmin' off all my cream!" she admonished, reverting by instinct to the tone of the autocrat.

Sylvia nodded, and in a happy whirlwind flew upon the new errands.

"Here — here are both of them," she announced breathlessly. "And while you are pouring the coffee out, I am going to run into the garden and see if I can't find a big pink rose with the dew on it. Mother will love to see a rose upon her tray!"

"She will love better dan enny rose de purty little face over dat tray," thought Mammy, with deep wisdom, but she did not voice the thought.

The charming outfit being at last complete, little Sylvia, quite sobered with the responsibility of carrying it alone, started with measured steps along the flagstones.

"Look out an' don't stump yo' toe on dat lump what de fool coal-man broke tryin' to drive his wagon over yistiddy," warned Mammy from her doorway.

That danger skirted, Mammy retired within, her mind upon her biscuits. Catching up the rolling-pin as if it were a weapon of defence, she wiped it on a corner of her apron, at the same time giving her eyes two furtive dabs. Then the wooden implement was

lifted high in both hands, and brought down on the dough with a force that made the windows rattle. With her first push, Mammy broke forth into song,

“In eighteen hundered an’ ninety-nine,
De Lord turnt water into wine.
In nineteen hundered an’ ninety-fo’
He pushed dem virgints thoo de do’.”

Now she was ready to cut out the biscuits. An empty yeast-powder can served this purpose well. Each downward motion came with the exactness and, to judge from Mammy’s scowl, the vindictiveness inherent in the falling of a guillotine. But it was only Mammy’s way of working. Her childlike mind was one to concentrate, with primitive intensity, upon the occupation of the moment. The low contralto crooning of her gospel hymns was part of it.

Now, as the cutter fell, each flaccid disc engendered was, in her thought, an enemy overcome. Still heavily frowning, she ranged her limp victims with care in the long, black rectangle of the baking pan, and was moving toward the stove as to a crematory, when suddenly her gaze encountered the face of the kitchen clock.

“My Gawd!” she exclaimed aloud, her vague triumph fading before its accusation, “ef it ain’t atter sebben, an’ not a fiah in de house done made!”

Meanwhile, the Little Ewe Lamb, having re-entered the chill loneliness of the back hall, felt all at once the fresh glow of her enterprise change into something unpleasantly like fear. What if Lucille

had missed her, and being suspicious — for Lucille's wits were keen — of this voluntary and independent desire to make amends, should even now be lying in wait, primed with her quick, scornful, "Don't be silly, Sylvia!" to annihilate it all!

The little one stepped very softly. Her ears, straining in apprehension, listened for sounds along the stairs and in Lucille's room. The mother's door, at least, had been reached without intervention. She stood panting a little, and then, both hands being filled, struck the lower panel with her foot.

"Mother," she whispered, leaning close to the crack.

There was no answer. The closed door in front of her and that across the hall were equally dumb.

"Mother!" she then cried out quite clearly, venturing all upon one moment's cast. "It is me, Mother. It's Sylvia. I have brought you up some coffee. Please let me in, quick, — quick!"

On the last word, the bolt grated back. Sylvia slipped in, at which the other, obeying the unspoken thought in each beating heart, slid the bolt back into place.

With that sound and its decree of isolation, a curious thing happened. Neither of the two could find a word for speech. Their eyes were instinctively averted. An insidious sense of embarrassment, almost of hostility, grew in the quiet room. It was as if two strangers had, for a common misdemeanor, been suddenly constrained.

Ciceley, who had begun to feel the very boards beneath her bare feet waveringly insecure, made her

way back a little unsteadily to the just quitted bed, where, keeping her face still averted, she drew the covering high.

The little one took a few steps, and paused.

"I've — I've brought some coffee," she stammered.

"It was very good of you," came from the stranger in the bed. "Will you place it on this little table?"

Sylvia obeyed, not without a few frightened shiverings of china.

"Thank you," said the low, courteous voice. It's possessor did not turn.

Sylvia, backing slowly away, encountered the corner of the footboard, and, not having the energy to resist the impact, sat down. At the protesting squeak of the old spring mattress, she tried to jump up, but failed. Now her eyes, wide, frightened, and vaguely incredulous, fixed themselves on her mother.

Ciceley was lying with her face toward a window. The old-fashioned green shutters, still drawn close, had two slats missing. Through the aperture a shaft of morning light streamed in, and lay like a hand on Ciceley's throat, just where the coarse, serviceable nightdress bared it. The girl found herself gazing wonderingly. Somehow she had never thought of her mother having a throat like that, a throat soft, sweet, and rounded, more fit for a setting of delicate lace than the dull high-collared black which invariably surrounded it. The chin was tilted back a little. It, too, was firm and pink and round.

"Mother!" the girl cried out impulsively.

Ciceley's mouth quivered. She caught her underlip between her teeth.

"Mother, I'm sorry!"

Ciceley sat upright. Still she shrank from meeting her daughter's eyes. She turned toward the tray and for the first time seeing the exquisite peace offering of the dewy rose, caught it up and held it, for a moment, to her hot cheek. The tears were coming and she did not want them yet. Swallowing back a sob, she managed to say quite calmly, "It is beautiful. Please put it in the vase under your father's picture. I will try to drink the nice coffee you have brought."

Sylvia, thankful for definite occupation, sprang toward the rose.

The wall space directly across from the foot of Ciceley's bed had been, as long as her children could remember, a sort of devotional shrine. In the center hung an enlarged photograph of Henry Dering, a face spirited, indubitably handsome, and with a sort of weak daring which makes its chief appeal to immature young girls. Under it was a small wooden bracket fashioned by him during the jig-saw period of boyhood, and upon this stood a flower vase, never allowed to go untenanted.

At each side of the large picture were groups of smaller ones, those to the right of Lucille in various stages of infancy, childhood, and young womanhood, while to the left was hung a similar display of Sylvia.

A large crewel motto, "Thy Will Be Done", worked in purple wool on perforated paper and framed in a wide black border, crowned this pathetic revelation of fidelity.

To little Sylvia and presumably to Lucille, the

exhibit had become so much a part of ordinary visible life that it had long since ceased to have a deeper meaning than, for instance, the pattern of the faded wall paper, or the number of cracks in the floor.

But through the loosened fibers of this troubled morning, the usual was slipping away. Even to herself Sylvia had become weirdly unfamiliar. Her little universe had suddenly disintegrated: from its readjustment anything might come.

Holding the rose as if it were the traditional spar of safety, she walked toward her father's picture.

From the vase she took out a fading sprig of sweet-olive, and, setting the rose in its stead, clasped her loose hands in front of her, and remained looking into the pictured semblance. Ciceley, knowing herself unobserved, watched eagerly.

Without turning, Sylvia said, "I wish that father had not died."

A shiver ran through her listener's heart. Perhaps in that one intuitive cry the little one had revealed the cause of this bitter failure; for that she had failed, Ciceley was now all too sure. Life had been too great a struggle to maintain alone. All of herself, her hopes, her faith, her personal happiness, she had poured into the crystal vase of motherhood, and this, by a few harsh words, had been broken. In an existence narrowed to the limits of a few predominant actualities, the trivial takes on the semblance of finality. Ciceley had no perspective. Hers was a mandrake nature, that sent forked roots into the shallowest soil.

All through these later years she had deliberately blinded herself to Lucille's growing arrogance. Others had warned her, but to their words, though kindly meant, she had been deaf as well as blind. Even the promptings of her own fears had been smothered. She had refused to credit suspicions in themselves incredible. Now, at one blow, she was stripped, disclosed — a plant uprooted and flung to the mercy of the pavement. In proportion to the depth of her cringing self-deception, she seemed now, in the agony of awakening, helplessly destroyed.

The climax of the intimate, domestic tragedy had been a climax possible only to limited perceptions. Lucille's white fury, her words, her scornful looks, burned, as they were, upon the retina of Ciceley's heart, should not have been sufficient cause for such seemingly final desolation.

A dim realization of this found place among the unstable images of her bewildered mind. Her reason leaned toward it; but the obsession of motherhood, nourished on fallacies, guarded by chronic refusal to look beyond its glimmering confines, had been Ciceley's too long. Now, in her hesitance, the phantom tide rose higher. She had no steady hand of logic with which to grasp a vanishing reality. Instead of this, the luminous outline, half-submerged, took on the form of excuse for her daughter.

"After all," she reflected, and with the thought a great relief, the sensation of being received again into a safe and familiar embrace, came over her, "it was not so much Lucille's fault as that of Jim."

Eagerly she elaborated the new and comforting

verdict. Yes, surely it was his presence, forced against Ciceley's judgment and her openly expressed command, — it was his angry words and merciless denunciations which not unnaturally had stung the high-spirited girl out of all semblance to her real self. "I might as well hold the ravings of delirium against her," thought the little mother, and with it the blessed feeling of relief grew deeper. If only people — and by people she meant the weighed-and-found-wanting Jim — would allow her to manage her daughters in her own way!

The human heart is capable of nimble and at times incredible evasions. The emotions, where guidance of will is weak, play often a juggler's part. So was it now with Ciceley. All of the hurt, the latent, unbearable resentment against Lucille which had been the night's grimacing horror, went in a flash of transference to the image of Colonel Jim. His tenderness she forgot. All women, even the gentlest, have somewhere in their natures an atavistic fiber of cruelty. Ciceley now dwelt with relish on the fact that she had so definitely refused to marry him. Last night she had grieved at the thought of paining him; now she was glad.

She looked straight at her husband's picture. On the handsome, slightly sneering face, she caught the gleam of her own triumphant satisfaction. All at once she felt strong, capable of dealing with any situation.

Sylvia, after receiving no response to her plaintive remark, had sunk down to a chair. From the slight motions of her bowed shoulders, Ciceley knew that she was weeping.

"Sylvia, come here," she commanded.

For answer, the sobs deepened. A flood of exquisite yearning swept through the mother's heart.

"Sylvia, my little girl — my littlest girl," she cried out, "come to the mother who loves you better than anything in the whole world."

Sylvia arose at this, and neared the bed stumblingly, wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her old red sweater. Ciceley held out her arms. At that moment they were as alike as two roses, blown but a day apart, upon the same branch.

"Curl up here on the bed near me," crooned Ciceley, "just as you used to do. Nothing must come between you and your mother, darling."

Sylvia, her young face bright, was about to obey when from the hall came Lucille's peremptory voice. "Sylvia, where are you?"

Sylvia stood upright, caught her breath, and turned instinctively toward the closed door.

"Sylvia," warned Ciceley, from the bed.

Now the knob rattled impatiently. "Why, what on earth —" murmured a voice in evident surprise; then, with a new note of sharpness, "Sylvia!"

"Yes," answered the little one, not realizing that she spoke.

Ciceley sank back to watch her.

"Hadn't I better —?" the child almost gasped. Without waiting for the mother's dictum, she ran to the door, unbolted it, and held it at a narrow aperture.

"Come along. Don't be silly. I want my breakfast," declared Lucille, catching her by the arm.

The little one looked back. "Mother," she cried.

In face and voice alike were protesting, a pleading to be forgiven for yielding to a stronger force.

Lucille, not noticing her mother, reiterated in a low, fierce tone, "Come!"

"Go — go, then — both of you," cried Ciceley. "Shut the door after you."

When they were gone, she lay still for a long, long time.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WOMAN

THE pause that followed Julia's opening of her door gave apparently no thought to time. Had its cessation depended on Jim's initiative, it might have gone on forever.

The slight moving of the woman's gray-clad figure at last broke the spell. Jim, wrenching his gaze away, strode forward; at which his companion softly closed the door behind him.

He found himself in the midst of charming drawing-room furniture, — white and pink and gold. No focussed electricity was here to daunt him. The soft, alluring radiance, evenly distributed, might have been filtered through the petals of the great sheaf of Brabant roses standing on the center table. Sofas and deeply cushioned chairs invited him on every hand.

The hostess, who had been watching breathlessly, now showed a faint hint of amusement. She tried to clear her throat, but no sound came. Silence grew tense. Then, as if impelled, the Colonel veered slowly around, and let deliberate eyes rest on his companion's face.

"So it is you, after all! It's Jule," he breathed, and with the words came a long sigh, as if a burden had fallen.

"Of course it's Jule! What did you expect? Do you find me so terribly altered?"

"Altered!" repeated Jim. "If it wasn't for your eyes — But what in God's name," he broke out, "have you been doing to yourself?"

Now on her face came a deeper tinge of pink. The admiration in his eyes and voice was unmistakable.

"It isn't, then," she hesitated archly, "that I have grown so old — or so much uglier?"

"Old! Ugly!" flouted Jim. "Why, you're a queen! That's why the first sight of you — You never used to be pretty!" he finished crudely, at which she gave a merry, satisfied laugh.

"There isn't any room for doubting you to be — just Jim!"

"Unfortunately there's not," grinned he. "But just look at my temples — white as Uncle Snow! And I'm gettin' fat! The way my clothes pull on me is something awful!" He tugged ruefully at the buttonless gap in the center of his waistcoat.

"Well," admitted Julia, with mischievous eyes, "your clothes might be improved. Fortunately, that's easy! Come sit down. I want to talk. But first —" Now she came swiftly up to him. Ease, grace, and a sort of conscious nobility moved in the air with her. "Do you realize," she demanded, a look of beautiful and loving candor on the upturned face, "that we haven't even shaken hands?"

"No more we have!" he cried, and, seizing in his

own rough paws the two exquisitely-kept members held toward him, crushed them to a numbing pain.

"Do you know, Jule?" he confided impulsively, "I honestly believe I have never been as glad to see anybody as I am right now. You make me feel alive all over! I sho' would like to kiss you!"

"And I sho' would like you to," she responded instantly, lifting her face to his. There was no hint of self-consciousness or coquetry in her frank surrender.

He pressed his lips against her cheek. It was resilient — smooth — cool — the cheek of a girl. In her nearness he perceived the same intangible, vaguely intellectual fragrance that had breathed from her morning's letter.

He held her close, and again would have kissed her, but she drew back and laughed, not quite steadily. "No! Once is quite enough! It has been a long, long time since I let a man do that! Now we must sit down and talk. Here, take this big armchair. You'll find it comfy."

As he obeyed, looking just a little dazed, his hostess, with a swift, decisive gesture, drew a second chair close. "Now," she exclaimed, with almost childish satisfaction, "this is fine! The next thing is to light your pipe. Oh, you needn't put on that innocent expression. I can see the end of one sticking out of your coat pocket!"

"B-b-but to smoke in here — in a lady's parlor," demurred the Colonel. Ancient objurgation from old Mrs. Rogers anent the profanation of her stately drawing-room darted to the surface of his mind. His questioning gaze was troubled, but distinctly hopeful.

"You needn't be afraid with me," she encouraged brightly. "I like to talk to a man when he is smoking. A man with his favorite pipe, and a woman sewing on baby clothes represent, in my opinion, the two nuclei of absolute human self-realization."

"I say, Jule," ventured her companion, in a voice slightly clouded with awe, after a few thoughtful puffs had aided him to digest this unusual statement, "you haven't gone in for the high-brow stuff, — New Thought — emancipated women — and all that rot, have you?"

"If you mean to ask," evaded Julia, "whether you see before you an acknowledged bluestocking, or a bomb-throwing Suffragette, I can ease your mind at once. Most certainly you do not! As for my interest in emancipated women," she went on more slowly, her grave, considering eyes on his, "there, I'll admit, you touch something real. I have come to believe that 'emancipation', as it is called, is seldom sought by the women who are supposed to possess it, and is equally as seldom desired. It is a hard condition imposed from without. All women, all real women, know that personal happiness comes to them only along the old, established thoroughfares of home, and love, and children, — most of all, love. Make no mistake about that! But this sort of happiness is not for every woman. In this lies their tragedy! And, Jim," here she bent forward, her eyes and voice taking on the appeal so dear to the heart of man, "it is because I know this that it seems to me neither unfeminine nor illogical for women who find themselves out in the world, doing a man's work,

paying taxes, managing property, serving the professions, or more often earning by the toil of their hands their daily bread, — for such unsheltered women to desire and demand, along with man's responsibilities, a man's full, legal status. But there!" she broke off suddenly. "I've left my stump at a bound! This is too precious an occasion to waste on theories! I have a thousand things to ask you, and about as many to impart."

She leaned back with a wave of the hand to indicate that she had banished serious discussion, and smiled at her companion reassuringly. To herself she was saying that perhaps already she had let her enthusiasm carry her too far. Jim was looking a little afraid of her. Besides, it was inconceivable that a man living the life he did, and tucked away in the cotton-wool of a country suburb, should have evolved a vital interest in up-to-date polemics. All of his instincts, inherited and acquired, would be against the claims of the New Woman. Until she had had time to gauge more accurately the present poise of her old friend's thought, the only topics safe would be those conserving personalities. Seizing the first of these that came, she asked, "And Ciceley! Dear little Sis. How are things going with her?"

A light flashed into Jim's face, only to die down instantly to gloom. He shook his head. "Not very well. I want to talk about her — later. First I want to know —" the effort he made to deflect his mind from Ciceley's affairs was obvious — "a lot more about yourself."

"Oh, there isn't much to tell," she answered lightly.

"Over there, on the other side, I naturally learned a few things. Can you believe that I've become really a good business woman?"

But Jim, no less than she, felt evidently that the strictly personal was to be preferred.

"I didn't mean that sort of thing so much," he answered. "It's about yourself — your looks. What you did to turn yourself into a beauty."

"Oh, Jim," she deprecated, with a happy blush, "you know I'm not a beauty. I never was and never can be! If I seem to have improved, it's only because I've found out ways of making the most of what I possess. Few people do make the most of themselves, you know!"

He grimaced at the look of meaning turned upon his bulging waistcoat, and parried her thrust by the challenge, "You told me in your letter that your hair had turned gray!"

"And so it has," she reiterated calmly. "Only, by a lucky chance, it has come in evenly instead of in streaks. It never had any definite color, you know. This gives it a sort of sheen."

"It surely does," he said admiringly, his eyes upon the exquisite coiffure. "It's like the pond at Stag Harbor when the moon is full, and a whole lot of little ripples across the top."

Julia sat upright in her astonishment. "Why, Jim! What a lovely speech!"

"Wasn't so bad, was it?" murmured Jim, in a huge pleased bashfulness. "Just wait till you see the pond now, and the new pagoda on that little island in the middle, and all my orange trees! You're

going to find a lot of changes, Jule. I wonder —” he mused, falling back into a note of despondency, “what you’re going to think of everything, anyway?”

“What is there for me to think?” she mocked him brightly, “except that I am glad — glad — *glad* to be back with ‘you-all’ again!” Her smile was one that could not go unheeded. “You’re all right, Jule,” he told her earnestly. Then suddenly, remembering something overlooked, he glanced about the room, demanding, “Where is that boy of yours?”

“Oh, I sent him off to a Cinema, — a ‘Movie’, as you call them over here, — before you came. I wanted you entirely to myself for this first hour.”

“That was awfully good of you,” he approved, but despite the emphasis, his voice lacked in conviction. The troubled, pent-up thoughts struggled in a new demand for utterance.

Julia, watching him intently without seeming in the least to do so, felt in her soul what was to come. By sheer will-power, she kept the smile upon her lips.

“I was thinking,” began Jim stumbly, “that if the boy is to get back soon, maybe I’d better —” He broke off with a look that pleaded for her furtherance.

“You mean that you think it better for us to talk about Ciceley before there is any chance of interruption?”

“Yes,” he responded gratefully. “That’s just it! You always did understand things, Jule!”

To this, his companion attempted no rejoinder. She was consciously gathering her forces against the

disclosure to come. Upon it, or, rather, upon his way of stating it, depended, for her, more that the man who spoke could ever dream.

"You said," her low and perfectly controlled voice led on, "that poor little Sis was in trouble."

"She is," groaned Jim. "The worst sort of trouble. That kind which seems as if nobody on earth could help you. It's those two ungrateful girls of hers!" he flung out suddenly, warned by the surprise on his listener's face into a more concrete form of expression.

"Her girls!" echoed Julia. "That does astonish me. I have understood, all along, that they were both growing up into perfect beauties."

"Pretty is as pretty does," quoted Jim sententiously. "I wasn't thinkin' about their looks. It's the way they act, — the way they treat that poor little mother!"

A tiny gleam, as of steel, flashed for an instant into Julia's eyes. "But surely — " she exclaimed, then, with an effort, held back the half formed words.

By this the floodgates of Jim's wrath were opened. In a torrent of words, choking at times into incoherence, he retailed to the tense and silent woman before him the scene in which, so recently, he had borne a part. Toward the last, the surge of his anger concentrated upon the remembered image of Lucille. "If you could have seen her, Jule!" he cried, with a shudder. "That white face of hers might have been chipped from a solid block of ice. And the way she looked at Ciceley! God!" he broke out, and all at once let his shaggy head fall to his hands, "I'd

rather have two lead bullets go through me, than meet that look in the eyes of a child of mine!"

Julia had remained utterly without speech. Almost, he would have said she did not breathe. Surely, not by an inch had the gray figure moved! It was, therefore, with a sensation of incredulity that Jim, finally lifting his face, saw that she had risen and stood with a hand outstretched.

"Don't say any more just now," she commanded, rather than entreated. "You must remember that all of it is very new to me. I must have time to think."

She moved away, with this, and passing over to a window, stood just within the white draperies, apparently gazing down into the lighted street.

"It doesn't seem right fair to you," murmured the man remorsefully, "and on your very first evening, too." He turned beseeching eyes, but Julia did not see them.

"If there was anybody else on earth—" he stumbled on. "But you see for yourself that it is a big trouble; and the minute I got your letter, — even this morning, before I knew how bad things really were with Sis, —" Again he broke off uncertainly.

"Yes?" encouraged a clear voice from the window.

"Ciceley herself has been wishing you'd come home — and when I heard that you were really coming, — why, Jule," here he essayed a tone of natural heartiness, "I said to myself right off, 'Well! If this arrival of dear old Jule, just in the nick of time, isn't a regular godsend!'"

"For Ciceley, of course."

"Why — ye-es. For poor little Sis. I know how fond you've always been of her. You are yet, ain't you?" he queried ungrammatically, but with pleading.

"Oh, of course."

Frowning a little, the man turned in his chair that he might view more squarely so perplexing a companion. Her profile was still all of her face that he could see, but in the poise of her upright figure was a sort of high courage, at which Jim again took heart. She was altogether a most pleasant vision for man's eyes to rest upon. Her gown of soft, mist-colored crêpe clung in such lovely and such quiet folds that it seemed to be a sentient part of her. The Oriental moonstones at her girdle and around the long, white throat gleamed as if with her own luminous thoughts. Yes, here was the one to help him. Comfort grew warm. Again he assured himself, in conscious phrasing, that what Ciceley needed most of all was the counsel and loving aid of such a woman.

In the completion of this cheering thought, Julia's gray draperies, as if stirred by her breathing, began to sway lightly. She turned, and moved toward him with swift decision.

Instinctively he would have risen, but she waved him back, and at a short distance stood looking deeply down into his eyes. He gazed back, wondering a little. On her lips there grew the shadow of a smile, a smile such as he had never seen before. In some vague way it thrilled him, but back of the thrill there was a fine, keen edge that drew along the very nerves of his spine. He blinked unconsciously;

then looking up again, saw only the face of his old friend Jule, the woman whom he was asking to be his helper, his close confederate in the redemption of another woman, and this the one whom all his life he had loved and striven to win.

CHAPTER TEN

THE ROSE OF DAWN

AVOIDING the small rocker in which she had been sitting, Julia drew a stiff upright chair so near the center table that she could rest an elbow on its polished surface. With a gesture of clearing the decks for action, she pushed to one side the obstructing, if lovely, large vase of roses. This left, between herself and Jim, only a space of pink-tinged air.

Her opening remark was at once so practical, yet seemingly so irrelevant, that Jim felt the impact like a small explosion.

"You had better light another pipe. You'll need it!"

The suggestion was accepted, but not without a certain guarded thoughtfulness. In Jim's experience, women did not usually approach a subject; they merely shut their eyes tight, and jumped.

She attempted to appear unconscious of his vague perturbation, and fingered delicately a bracelet on her left arm. When smoke from the small altar of peace across from her began rhythmically to ascend, Julia, with a smile and a brisk assumption of con-

fidence, began, "First of all, Jim. If we are to help Sis, we've got to understand each other."

"But we do, already. Don't we?" parried Jim. "Well," she hesitated. "I am not altogether sure of that 'we.' Your position is unmistakable, of course. The fact is, —" here she let her eyes rest upon him with a ruminative, and again disturbing serenity, — "I am afraid that I take an entirely different view. It is my own summary of the situation that I want to make clear."

"Oh," said Jim, moving uneasily. "Well, fire ahead."

"There is no doubt at all that things are in a bad way between Ciceley and her daughters?"

"In a bad way!" echoed Jim. "That's too mild a statement. They are ungrateful young wretches, those two girls. I never —"

"And, of course, every one considers Ciceley entirely blameless," Julia pursued evenly, cutting the threatened diatribe off cleanly at its very source.

Jim sat more upright, his blue eyes growing a little hard. "Look here, Jule," he began, threateningly.

"You must have patience, Jim," she interpolated. "It is all to help Sis. I think I can do it, but it's got to be in my own way."

"That's all right too," answered Jim, only partially placated. "But when you hint that poor little Sis is at fault —" he broke off, mumbling.

Julia considered him for a long moment. A shade of doubt grew in her face. Jim, after a few indignant puffs upon his pipe, brought his eyes back to hers.

"I'm listening," he encouraged, when she remained

silent, "I'll try not to flare up. Only —" Again he broke off, his tone betraying impatience.

"I am as sorry for poor little Sis as you are," Julia said, speaking at last, and choosing her words carefully. "I think I am a good deal sorrier, for I can see things that you, and probably most of the Hill people with you, do not see. At first I was sure that I could help, but now —"

"You don't mean that you are going to give it up before you've really begun!" protested Jim. "Why, Jule, that isn't a bit like you."

She smiled at him a little wistfully. "You don't realize, I suppose, that I had begun."

Jim's head hung down like a punished schoolboy's. "I see. I deserved it. Please don't give up. I won't break out again."

Her expression of doubt did not fade.

"I mean it, honest, Jule," the man pleaded. "It's only this confounded temper of mine. But I can hold it in. I can do anything that will help Sis."

Julia leaned back suddenly, and put one hand before her eyes. When her face showed again, it was clear, self-controlled, and a little judicial. She bent toward him. "I warn you, then, the next time you 'break out', I shall throw the whole thing over."

"I understand. You can count on me," he pledged himself.

"Just keep in your mind that it is entirely for Sis," she said, with the ghost of a quiver on her lips.

"That's just what I'm doing."

"Then, for another start. When a snarl is to be untied, the best way is to begin at the tightest knot."

"It is," said Jim submissively.

"And, obviously, you'll never untie it as long as you pretend it isn't there."

Jim nodded. She was getting rather deep.

"Yet that is exactly what you and Ciceley's other friends have been doing. You pull and tug at the loose ends of the problem, the behavior of the girls, and you refuse to see that the hard knot, the core and center of all the trouble, is Ciceley herself."

She paused, and her keen look gave out a gleam of challenge.

"Go on," muttered Jim, swallowing hard.

"I have no doubt that the entire Hill regards Ciceley as a martyr. She is held up as an example of devoted widowhood, giving her whole life up to her dead husband's memory and his children."

"I don't see how even you, Jule, can help seeing the truth of that," ventured Jim.

"Truth!" flared the other. "There has never been one molecule of truth in the whole affair! Ciceley has been kept from reality as if it were the smallpox. Why, probably to this day she has never been told the facts of her husband's death. Has she?" was the sudden demand.

"N-o-o, I don't think she has," said Jim, looking from side to side as if he longed, now that the torrent was upon him, to escape.

But Julia was relentless. "If ever there was a ne'er-do-well, a scapegrace on this earth, it was that same Henry Dering," she hurtled on. "When he died, it was a good riddance to all concerned. You knew it then, and you know it now. You shielded

Ciceley from that first moment. You have literally supported her and Henry's children. Oh," she cried, "you needn't try to stop me. I have had means of finding out. Of course this has been kept back from Ciceley. You have treated her soul, her mentality, in just the way it would be if you took a normal child, and encased its two legs in steel braces. Whose fault is it if the child learns to depend upon the braces, and ceases to use the power it was born with! Truth! Ciceley doesn't know its meaning!"

Jim kept his tongue, but his eyes blinked rapidly.

"I started out," said Julia, with a softening little break at the beginning of her words, "to say that Ciceley was the one at fault. I take that back. It isn't Ciceley only. It is her friends, and most of all —"

"Don't say it, Jule," the man interrupted harshly, "I'm beginning to see too well. We all meant it for the best. She seemed the sort of person that had to be shielded and protected."

"The sort of person, you mean, who liked to be lied to!" Julia corrected. "Poor little Sis, swaddled in sentimentality, fed up with outworn traditions, pitied, and loved, and encouraged in her self-destroying weaknesses by the very ones who should have tried to strengthen her. Is it to be wondered at that when a new, alert, and vital intelligence such as Lucille begins to match her growing powers against an ineffectual opponent, she should learn to despise it?"

"That's an awful word to use between a mother and her child," reproved Jim solemnly.

"Words! Words! Words!" was the impatient

retort. "In a small, shut-in community like Richmond Hill, you people use words and hang your moth-eaten ideas on them, just as you hang your clothes on rusty nails. If the fact is there, why blench and turn pale at the word? We are after the truth of things, and the unhappy truth that faces us right now is that Ciceley has failed, or rather," she corrected herself, "is failing, in the biggest enterprise ever entrusted to a woman's hands, — that of intelligent motherhood."

Jim could not answer. The old pipe had gone out, and mechanically he had thrust it back into a sagging coat pocket. He was huddled down in the pink brocaded chair, an almost ludicrous image of flaccid despondency.

The woman watching him felt all at once a curious reversal of time. Again she faced the big, despairing boy who was just telling her of Ciceley's refusal. "I'm a one-woman man, Jule," the dumb lips were saying. Again it was her part to comfort him. A smile of maternal tenderness irradiated her face.

"Don't look so wretched, dear old Jim," she begged. "Remember I do not think the situation hopeless. Ciceley has a lot of sense in her quiet way. That clash with Lucille has probably done much to wake her up. It is our part to see that she doesn't fall back into stupor."

Jim's fixed and gloomy stare refused to change.

"Now listen!" she cried, in a tone of bright command. "Just to show you that I know a little something about Ciceley's problem, I am going to inflict

you with my own experience. Shall you care to hear?"

"Why, of course," murmured the other, trying with only partial success to appear polite. "Anything about you, Jule. You know —"

She had to bite her lips to keep from laughing.

"Well, to begin, we shall have to go back a good, long time, to the very day, in fact, that you put Wick and me on the train, and started us off for England. Heavens!" she flung in, "And what a weebegone, crêpe-hung effigy of widowhood I was! Old Mrs. Rogers had helped me in selecting my 'weeds.' My handkerchief — I can see it yet — was a two-inch square of white, let into a four-inch black border. There was not a mortuary detail overlooked. I am sure I had black ribbons in my underwear! But the blackest fibers of them all were those connected with my mental outlook."

Jim was beginning to show a faint interest. She talked on vivaciously.

"At that time I was obsessed with the idea — Ciceley's idea — that the remainder of my existence was to be dedicated to just one thing, — the welfare of my child."

Jim's honest eyes here expressed a sort of hurt astonishment that so obvious and altogether commendable a thought should have been subject to revision.

"Like Ciceley, I took devotion, maternal dedication, to imply unceasing sacrifice, the abrogation of all personal desires, and consequently personal development."

"Well?" queried Jim. "And doesn't it?"

"Oh, you blind bachelor-man!" she chaffed him merrily. "Suppose you had a spirited horse to tame, would you begin by cutting your arm-muscles?"

Giving this homely simile a moment to sink in, she pursued.

"The training of a child is, in more ways than one, like the training of a colt. The higher the breeding of the colt, the more intelligence and muscle the trainer needs. With a child you have, in addition to physical guidance, a thousand complexes of mind and soul and inherited tendencies. The ideal, perfect, modern mother," she declared with vehemence, "should be, first, a biologist, secondly a business woman, third, a physician, and, most important of all, a technical psychologist. No wonder you look amazed!" Here a gay laugh rang out. "Don't fear. I am only the mere superficial skimming of these social sciences. I have read a good deal, it is true, but all that I learn merely has the effect of making me realize how little it is. One never knows enough to be a wise mother!"

She leaned back now, deliberately controlling the excitement that her own words had aroused.

"The real secret, Jim," she said a little later, speaking with more restraint, "the fundamental necessity in attempting to influence a growing mind is to keep yours as young in spirit, and ages older in knowledge."

"Poor little Sis," murmured Jim, apparently irrelevant. Julia understood.

"But I am miles away from where I started!" she cried out. "This isn't to be a theory, but a

quite definite demonstration. Well, we got over to England somehow. I took Wick to his preliminary school and left him there. For business reasons, in order to keep in touch with the firm of solicitors who were managing my husband's English investments, I went to live in London, taking a suite at one of the less expensive hotels. I knew a little about business, even then. Judge Preston had fallen into the way of consulting me; but somehow, in this crisis, it never occurred to me as a possible and vital interest. I was a heartbroken widow, consecrating my *crêpe-hung* life to my boy. Therefore it seemed the proper thing to remain in darkened chambers, brooding over the past and shrinking at thought of the future. A cheerful and vitalizing atmosphere for a boy to come back to at the end of a normal, out-of-door week with other boys!" she denounced, with a note of scorn.

"Then you had the boy with you part of the time," remarked Jim sympathetically.

"Yes, from each Saturday noon till early the following Monday, — poor lad."

Jim frowned, but without waiting for comment she hurried on.

"Just at the first I used to go up to his school by an early train on Saturdays, just for the bliss of having him a little longer. I met a few of his friends. They seemed to avoid me, and Wick, while they were around, was so utterly unlike his affectionate self that I was annoyed and troubled. At last he found courage to tell me that the 'other fellows' laughed, because they said I came after him, as if I didn't

trust him to ride on the train alone. I was deeply hurt, but I stayed away."

"The young cub!" growled Jim.

"Not at all. I was the one to blame. After I stopped going to his school, I literally existed only in the thoughts of his visit. All of my meals were served in a private dining room. I considered it more 'delicate' to avoid publicity. Wick and I ate in solemn state, with two butlers to serve us. Oh, what a fool I was!"

"I can't see that, Jule."

"No, but you will."

"One Saturday, a day, I remember, that was all blue and gold outside, with a heavenly, soft little wind blowing in from the Thames, the boy was late. I stood, glued to the window, watching this way and that, a hundred different scenes of horror painted on my self-tormenting mind. Finally he came, and I said to myself that the mother-anxiety instinct was sacredly true. He had been injured. His head was bandaged in white, and one arm was in a sling. I flew down to the hotel door, dragging him through it bodily, hurling my terrified questions, while the servants and the other guests stood grinning. I never saw them, but Wick did. He wrenched himself away, beseeching me to wait until we got to our room. This did not stop me. Finally, Wick could shut the door on the world that had grinned at him, and to my horror I saw that he faced me with something like anger in his eyes. I had never before seen that look! Stricken by it, but still unwarned, I continued my demands for an explanation. He was surly.

I nagged and tormented him." A sob caught in her throat and for an instant she held a tight hand against it.

"I want you to bear well in mind," she resumed in a more ordinary voice, "that during all this — four months, I think it was — I had gone nowhere, and made no friends. Sometimes, at twilight, I would creep about the Park or along the Thames in my black veil. When Wick was with me, I did not wish even this. I kept him there, a prisoner to my own morbidness. I often wonder how the poor lamb stood me as long as he did."

She smiled a reminiscent smile, touched with a sad self-scorning.

"But the fight," reminded Jim. "Of course he'd been fighting."

"Yes, he admitted that, but when I insisted upon knowing the cause, he was silent. Like the idiot I then was, I jumped to the conclusion that it was something he was ashamed of, something he dared not tell. At this, I started in quoting scripture. I censured him first for deceiving and concealing things from his poor mother. Of course the fifth commandment was dragged in. Then I began a tirade on the wickedness of fighting. Here was a piece of contemptible self-deception, for I really believed in a boy's fighting, when the provocation is unbearable. But I gave neither Wick nor my morbid self the benefit of this doubt. I was simply in terror that he might be hurt. I am sure he saw through me, even at the moment. Nevertheless, I kept on. I tried to make him promise never to fight again, and was

fool enough to point out how pained and shocked his father would have been. At this the poor child, goaded and lashed beyond control, told me the cause for his fighting."

Jim's eyes, by this, were eager. "Yes," he encouraged. Again it was the boy Jim, who sat before her.

"It seems," continued the narrator more deliberately, "that all along, from the time of my first lugubrious appearance at the school, the boys had been ragging him. They referred to me as his nurse, his keeper. Boys at their age are not very considerate. They had invented nicknames for me, the 'raven', the 'inky fountain', and a lot of others I have forgotten. But the final sneer, the one that sent Wick in a red fury against the speaker, was when one of the big boys called me the 'Great American Hearse.' Rather clever, now, wasn't it?"

Jim, after a gleam of appreciation, instantly subdued, protested hotly. "No, it was brutal! The scallawag! I hope Wick pounded him to a jelly!"

Julia shook her head. "He was twice Wick's size. He might have done a lot more harm — physical harm, I mean — than actually he did. All English boys like pluck. And as for his part as inciter, — I shall love that boy until his life's end."

"Love him!" echoed the astonished man. "Well, I'll be tee-totally —"

"You needn't be," she suggested calmly. "I repeat, that English boy was the direct means to my salvation. Afterward he became one of our most frequent guests. You see, I thanked him."

Her eyes, bright and a little quizzical, set themselves on his.

"I reckon you know what you are talking about," smiled Jim, using that tone of kindly patience which so flatly contradicts the surmise.

"I know," she nodded, "and so will you in a minute, for this is what it did. After the first shock, in which I seemed to be caught up in a cyclone, whirled in ten directions, and set down in the same spot, I seemed to feel, all at once, the volt of a new electricity in my atrophying brain. Everything cleared! I was, as by a miracle, delivered from myself. It took just that one volt to change my whole conception of what motherhood really means. I had been thinking of myself, my own sorrow, loneliness, homesickness, and various other mental maladies, and really not of Wick at all. He was being used as a sort of clothes rack, on which I aired my crêpe, or hung my tear-soaked handkerchiefs out to dry. Those week-end visits, made so faithfully, must have been nightmares to a healthy boy.

"While I stood there thinking — planning — deciding — with a swiftness and surety my mind had never known before, Wick lay on the bed, his face averted, sobbing his little heart away. I drew myself up; and, marching as much like a soldier on parade as I knew how, strode past him to an old-fashioned wardrobe, banged the doors wide, and jerked from its hook my widow's bonnet and its long, baneful draperies.

"By this time Wick had begun to watch me from the corner of one swollen eye. I punched that hat

and veil into a wad the size of a football, and, almost running to the fire, thrust it into the coals, and held it rigidly with a poker, till the last writhing crisp had fallen to white ash. Wick was now sitting upright on the edge of the bed. I heard him give a gasp. Then I sprang from my knees and, crossing to him, 'Wick,' I said, and somehow I managed a smile, 'Wick, dear boy, there went the last of the Great American Hearse. I think we'll have dinner down-stairs in the main dining room to-night. And what do you say to a musical comedy afterward?'

"There isn't much more more to tell," she said, after a pause in which apparently she had relived, with a new perspective of satisfaction, the described scene. "During that very week I moved out of my gloomy, ultra-respectable hotel, and took a cheerful little apartment in Knightsbridge, overlooking Hyde Park. There was an extra bedchamber for Wick's school friends. He seldom, after that, came down alone. I tried to make them all like me, and I believe that I succeeded. Since then I have never worn crêpe, or solid black. I took up the study of stocks and bonds as if it were a game. All of Wick's scientific work was new to me. I began to study it, and to go further. There are no such libraries as those in London. Also I made good friends, both men and women. The boy and I had more invitations than we could meet. He accepted my popularity with 'grown folks' as a matter of course, but his pride in the boys' admiration and liking was touching. We became not so much mother and son, as comrades,

chums, fellow-students, and playmates. His favorite name for me yet is 'chum.'"

Again she would have fallen into happy reverie, but a certain restless movement from the chair before her brought recollection of the real issue involved.

"Of course," she said a little hastily, "I cannot pretend that my particular problem bears a very close relation to Ciceley's. It is possible that girls are different."

"Yes," seconded Jim eagerly. "That's just what I've been thinking all along. If Wick had been a girl, now?"

There was questioning, almost a challenge, in his eyes. She met them fairly. He could not fail to read in the bright and steadfast intelligence of her returning look complete self-confidence.

"Whether a boy or girls," she summarized, "the one supreme necessity is in keeping oneself in touch with them. Mental inertia, the lure of the line of least resistance, are the snares of middle age. Some people, like Ciceley, are born with a tendency toward negation. But negation is a path that no one, least of all a mother, can afford to tread."

She waited now for Jim to speak. As a preliminary he drew a long, discouraged sigh. "Hasn't poor little Sis gone pretty far along that road already?" In even so slight a concession, he felt himself disloyal.

"Yes, but not hopelessly," cried Julia. "That's what I won't believe. It will take time, and patience, and more tact than either of us has ever used before,

but between us I feel certain it can be done. Lucille has already discharged her stick of dynamite," she went on, smiling to see the growing animation of her listener's face. "I have a few sticks of that excellent commodity up my own sleeve."

Jim, glancing toward the diaphanous draperies, grinned.

"Then I descend on Sis to-morrow!" she declaimed. "Now, don't look terrified. I'm not going to bite her. But in the morning, early, it is to be. I am specially anxious to take her by surprise. Listen!" she cried out in another tone, her head turned swiftly. "I hear Wick."

"Why, I don't hear a thing," declared Jim, but even with the words, a quick knock sounded.

At Julia's joyous "Come," a boy entered. He was slender, and not very tall. Judge Preston had been a short, stout man. The first impression given by Wick was that of straightforward energy. He moved instantly and directly toward his mother's guest, who sprang up to meet him. On hearing the Colonel's name, the boy smiled suddenly, disclosing an array of teeth marvellously white and even. His mouth, slightly repressed when in repose, broke, with the act of smiling, into winning curves. An almost girlish dimple, cordially and ungratefully detested by its owner, played at the left corner of his lips.

"Colonel Jim!" he exclaimed, a hand outstretched, "I should say I did remember! My! But I'm jolly well pleased to be at home once more!"

"God bless my soul!" rejoined the Colonel in huge delight, plying with energy his numbing grip. "It's

the boy all right! But look here, sonny, that English accent of yours is going to get you a lot of knocks!"

"Oh, I'm well coached," said Wickford. "My chum there," he turned a merry, affectionate look upon his mother, "has seen to that. The boys have already been after a bit of ragging down in the hotel lounge."

"He means vestibule — corridor — foyer — whatever they call the place you sit in, over here," explained Julia, laughing from one face to the other.

Standing before Jim, who was as big as a man ever gets to be without being too big, the boy seemed a mere stripling. Julia unconsciously moved nearer, thrusting an arm through his. Her bright, intelligent face glowed with tenderness.

To her suggestion that they all sit down, the Colonel demurred that he must catch the car now due, as the night schedule between "town" and Richmond Hill was remarkable chiefly for its wide spacing.

His hosts went with him to the elevator door. Partly in the act of descent Jim won from the boy a promise to visit him the following morning. "We'll knock around Stag Harbor till after lunch," said Jim. "Then we can both stroll over to 'Little Sunshine', and see for ourselves how that giddy young mother of yours has been behaving."

When the last echo of his hearty voice was still, the mother and son paced slowly along the carpeted corridors, their arms about each other. Wick had

begun to talk already of his evening's experiences, the strange rising to the surface of memories he thought forgotten, the almost miraculous sensations of familiarity mingled with unrealities.

"I understand too well," she answered him. "It is a little terrifying. It makes one realize that nothing ever vanishes. It only lies in wait."

As he opened her drawing-room door, he paused. "I don't believe I'll come in, mother. It's on to eleven, and you look a bit fagged."

"Not for one cigarette?"

"It never stops at one when I'm with you," he smiled.

"Then good night, boy."

"Good night, dear chum."

Within her apartment, the door securely locked, she first snapped off the lights. Moving softly and gropingly, she neared the table, guided by the scent of roses, and, reaching them, put her face far down among their petals. Perfume may be an anæsthetic, or — a stinging irritant.

After a single, long, indrawn breath, she turned away, and, passing into her bedchamber, began a feverish search for the electric switchboard. With all lights at their fullest, she went deliberately toward a mirror, and stood there, looking, with hard, appraising eyes at her own charming semblance. A smile, — if anything so grim and mirthless should be called a smile, — twisted her well-cut lips.

Again she wheeled, and, moving always as if impelled by a strange, underlying excitement, went to her trunk, and threw back the lid. Tray after tray

was lifted, and set down at random. At last, reaching unerringly to one of the deepest corners, she uncovered a small, tin box. This, still unopened, she carried to the dresser. It would seem now as if she wished to avoid the eyes of that woman in the glass. With face averted, she put one hand up to a slender platinum chain quite hidden by the moonstones at her throat, and drew out, very, very slowly, two objects hanging from it. One was a tiny key, the other a flat gold locket.

The key she fitted instantly to the box, setting the top back with a single gesture. The locket presented, evidently, a graver problem. She regarded it uncertainly, turning it over, closing her hand on it, only to spread it wide again. Suddenly, with a tiny shiver of resolution, she opened it. The face of the boy Jim smiled at her.

She closed her eyes, throwing her head far back. Her lips were pressed together to a line of determination that, in some way, was infinitely pathetic. Blindly she closed the locket, shivering again at the sharp click it gave. Then she lowered it, as to a tiny grave, within the gaping box.

Whatever kindred mementos were already hidden there, she did not trust herself to review. There was no use, anyway. Each one was duplicated in her heart. Now, last of all, the locket must be hidden.

She had taken the key from its chain. The box with its recent accession, went back into the trunk. Only the key was left for reminder. She gazed at it for an instant, and then deliberately wrenched it

apart. On the palm of her steady right hand the tiny fragments lay.

"There, Julia Wickford," she said aloud, "there lies the last shattered prism of your rainbow, the last torn petal from your Rose of Dawn."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CICELEY'S GARDEN

FORGETTING, or more probably deliberately ignoring her mother's stifled request to close the door, Lucille, her chin high in air, and a jealous, possessive arm encircling little Sylvia, led her, in spite of pantomimic remonstrance, along the bare hallway and down the stairs.

The elder's high, sweet voice, just a trifle clearer now than the circumstances seemed to demand, scattered bright echoes. She was planning vivaciously their dual "dates" and pleasures for the day, and her words swept back. The mother strove hard not to hear them. Now the speaker laughed. It was a mellifluous sound. Lucille had been at some pains to cultivate it. Ciceley shrank back as though it were the swinging tips of a knout. It was not so much panic or surprise at Lucille's laughing which sent her cowering down, but a sick dread of the little one's answering mirth. But Sylvia did not laugh. Assured of this, Ciceley drew a long quivering breath of thankfulness, and for an instant let her lids droop.

After the two had reached the dining room, with the door closed behind them, the mother again lay

silent and still. She felt the quiet as it were a tide of deep warm influence on which she could let her weary spirit drift. In a moment more, through the window, she heard old Mammy shuffling along the flagstone walk. From the slow, measured tread, Ciceley knew that she was bringing in breakfast. The sudden alarm that Mammy might think it necessary to bring a second tray to her mistress' room drove the small figure to an upright posture. She frowned anxiously, and glanced here and there as if for escape. It was certain that she could not remain in bed, the prey not only of circling, unhappy thoughts, but of constant fear of intrusion.

On one corner of her footboard she had hung the day before a shabby old black skirt. This was to remind her that it needed a new binding. It was always difficult for Ciceley to remember to do things for herself.

A desire to begin the homely occupation seized her. She was always more tranquil when she sewed. There was something of hypnotic soothing in the rhythmic process.

Revivified by the definite objective, she was half out of bed when, all at once, she remembered that her sewing materials were in a room directly over that in which the girls were breakfasting. She stiffened in the attitude of egress.

Sewing had become of recent years a large dimension of Ciceley's habitual drudgery. This upper wing room, otherwise unused, had been fitted up for the sole purpose. The old family machine was there, a clattering, archaic specimen. To the girls it was the

object of much merry scorn. Lucille declared its noise got on her nerves. Down on the cool verandah, or, in winter, by the great dining-room fire, she would sometimes work upon the daintier accessories, whipping on lace, or making up bows of ribbon. The little one generally kept close. Besides, one would as soon think of having a butterfly wash windows as of seeing little Sylvia sew! Ciceley remained alone in the sewing-room for many hours at a time, unquestioningly content with her self-imposed toil.

The machine was piled high this morning, as Ciceley well knew, with diaphanous lengths of white organdie, "sprigged" with a small green fern, destined to be made into a dress for Lucille. There was nearly always on the old machine a similar heap of fragile beauty. Because of it Ciceley, quite cheerfully oblivious of the fact, went shabby. It was one phase in her passionate pride in their beauty, this choosing and fashioning of new garments for her daughters. In her adoring eyes each triumph, when completed, when patted, pinned, and adjusted by her own careful hands upon its allotted possessor, brought to the surface some fresh and hitherto unappreciated loveliness.

Under these self-annihilating reflections, Ciceley's weak mother heart, discarding personal necessities, began to yearn toward the fern-sprigged fabric. She held out a hand, moving her fingers dreamily. The soft fabric moved between them. She knew just how she wished those folds about the throat to lie. And what joy it would be, just seeing that moonlight-colored throat of Lucille's rising above the folds!

A clear, mocking laugh, darting into the silence, came in small silvery shivers to her ears. Her face changed. She set her mouth as sternly as its gentle curving would permit, and, getting from the bed at a single bound, said to herself that Lucille's sewing should go untouched for that day at least. An instinct, wise as it was unusual, told her that a resumption of servitude at this point would be construed by Lucille as utter and complete capitulation.

Both for her own sake and for that of the tall girl who had humiliated, and was still defying her, the mother knew that she must find some way of self-assertion. But where was she to turn? What path had been left open? No Gulliver was ever more helplessly bound by Lilliputian filaments than she by her self-wrought chains of maternal thralldom.

With an anxious little frown, she rose and walked on bare feet to the nearest window. She pushed the old green shutter wide, and for an instant caught her breath, dazed by the sudden brilliancy. It was a world of blue and gold and green. No wind stirred. The mocking-birds were as busy as if it had been May. After her first delighted sense of beauty came the reaction of a plaintive questioning. "How can the old, familiar world be so beautiful, when I am so unhappy?"

She leaned out farther. The sunshine encircled her with warm and sentient arms. Serene and still under her gaze lay the sun-steeped garden. And at the sight, her heart, as though it had been a thing of separate volition, moved softly out of her breast to go straying along the flower-bordered paths. At

last she had found and recognized her conscious haven.

Now she began to dress with such celerity that one might have thought her striving to outrace a second, and this time an hindering impulse. Her imagination was held rigidly to the single goal. "My garden! My dear garden!" she kept whispering. The words were a sort of invocation.

She swerved a little in wondering why the vision of this refuge had not come to her first of all; but, being peculiarly unversed in self-analysis, did not persist to the obvious solution. This work among her flowers, being Ciceley's one and only personal joy, was inevitably the last to be indulged and the first to suffer inhibition. To give, as now she was determined upon giving, the rise of a busy forenoon to its alluring practice, showed an advance toward individual freedom little short of anarchy.

The black skirt, still unrepaired, was hastily assumed. For a waist she put on a cast-off blouse of Lucille's; and, reaching about for a warmer covering, caught up a shapeless garment that had once been a white sweater, the property of little Sylvia. Perceiving that it had been definitely discarded, Ciceley, in one of the spurts of thrift employed only toward herself, had attempted to dye it black. The result, both as to general outline and to color, had been something distressingly resembling an ancient, piebald horse.

The summit and completion of this outfit awaited her down-stairs, in the shape of a wide straw hat. In antithesis to the sweater, it had started in by being a glossy black, and had assumed by less arbitrary

methods its present aspect of mottled, dingy grayness. It was kept always on a certain nail, — rusty, of course, — in a tiny shed where Ciceley housed her gardening implements, stacks of empty flower-pots, earth-sifters, stakes for tying up discouraged plants, and a great, shaggy bunch of raffia.

At her door seemed to lie in wait a wraith of her usual timidity. Only for an instant it held her, then throwing up her chin with a gesture, had she known it, not unlike that of Lucille, she moved with quick steps down to the lower hall and out through the back door to her tool-house. She would not let herself surmise what the girls were thinking. Instead, she said to herself that she hoped old Mammy had not noticed her.

With the trowel securely grasped, and the old hat tied at a most unbecoming angle over her hastily-brushed hair, she felt a definite accession of valor. Now, in a sense, she was queen. Humbly and quaintly crowned, indeed, and with a mud-stained scepter; but none the less a sovereign, the undisputed holder of a wide, green realm.

She hurried on, not daring a backward glance until, knowing herself well-screened by a thick gardenia hedge, she came to a standstill, her whole body drooping in an instinctive and soothing relaxation.

There was no special place to begin. The dear flowers at all times and seasons were grateful for her ministrations. Now, in the autumn months, the worst of the marauding weeds were over. She looked about with slow, appraising ease. A little holiday wind rose in her heart, blowing away the mists.

A redbird, which year after year had builded in the same down-hanging limb of an old pear tree, swung on a near-by twig to welcome her. She smiled at the crimson chorister, so like a heart set free. After all, the world had its own right to be beautiful!

The fall crop of violets was in full bloom. Stooping to a purple mass, she noticed among the leaves intruding stems of the alert green chickweed. Even in winter these jaunty pirates often ventured among the legitimate anchorage. High on the tips waved a few white stars of flowers, small hopeless flags of truce.

The gardener sighed. Destruction of a weed brought to her always a tiny stab of remorse. Nerv-
ing herself to the distasteful necessity, she ran bare fingers along the earth until the central stem of the interloper met her touch, at which she gave a desperate, though reluctant tug. It came up whole. Ciceley would never wear gloves while digging among her flowers, having a secret theory that they understood and in their own way resented the fastidious snobbery.

On her outstretched palm, conserving its posture of vitality, the chickweed lay. She gazed long at it, and to her mind came a troubled analogy between its forcibly uprooted condition and her own. A few green, oval seed-pods had already formed. They would make a dainty salad-course for Sylvia's canary's breakfast. In lieu of the forbidden kittens, the little one had transferred her desire for living pets first to a family of white rabbits, and later on to a particularly shrill canary. All such objects of emotional appeal were by the elder girl frankly and openly despised.

She had no need of pets. For a long moment Ciceley struggled against the temptation to lay it aside in some sheltered nook where she could find it later. Then, with a tightening of the lips, she threw it from her. It caught among the stems of a leafless rosebush, sprawled like a pigmy octopus, and finally hung flaccid and ignominiously undone. At this she rose quickly and moved on, well from the sight of it. Weeding was not to be her chosen occupation for this particular morning.

Next she was claimed by a small camellia bush, which, for no reason she had been able to fathom, persisted in being an "ailing child." Its blossoms, though always sparse, were of a peculiar beauty, a transparent, waxen white, shading in the center to a luminous green, the hue of chrysoprase. If Lucille could be said to have a favorite flower, it was this.

As a mother over a cradle, Ciceley now bent down to the little shrub. She counted, as many times before, the number of round, tightly folded buds. There were but five, a scantier yield than usual. She must see to it that none of these fell off. How exquisite Lucille had looked that day, now nearly a year ago, as she had started off to Betty Ravenel's party. Her gown, all white and clinging, had been made of course by the little mother's hands. Even now, in retrospect, she smiled at the triumph of it. For ornament the girl had worn a single bloom of this camellia. Against that calm young breast it had seemed to take on the virtue of a talisman, a symbol of purity, — passionless, mystical, — wrought out of distant, moonlit snows. She held the lovely

image in her memory as one holds a priceless treasure in the two hands. Then, with a splintering blow, the thought struck, — it was this same exquisite, virginal thing, her own child, who last night —

With a low cry she fell to her knees and commenced a precipitate digging. Her trowel-stabs thrust deep, one after the other, into the very substance of perplexity. Yet to what purpose? This was at best an outlet, a mere physical relief from an inner tension! Where could she go, or what employment turn to, when each encountered object, be it weed or flower, served as a swift, malignant clue to drag her backward into the blind maze of her problem?

She must assert herself! This was indubitably clear. But how? Was she not at the very moment essaying it? And for all result that she could see, there was only a deepening of chaos. She paused in her work to give this phase of impotence a wider consideration. After all, it had a tinge of the unreasonable, the fantastic, that a mother should feel so utterly baffled by the perversity of her own child. If only she could manage to detach the thousand filaments of habit. If she could see with an outside mind. Prayer had not helped her, nor the long sleepless hours through which she had wept and striven in her attempt at resolution. She was too close to the core of her dilemma, too much a part of it. Vaguely she was conscious that the thing she most needed was that which least she could give, — an intelligent perspective. And who was to grant it?

As if silence had spoken, came the word "Jim." Ciceley started and looked fearfully about. The

sound had been astonishingly real. Nothing moved except the redbird, which, on the earth a few feet from her had been watching with a hopeful and expectant eye the swift upturnings of her trowel.

Yes, Jim was of course always ready to help her, but his presence last night had done more harm than good. His persistent and ludicrous attitude toward herself, apart from his now declared hostility to Lucille, made him, in Ciceley's mind at least, an impossible and undesirable ally.

Yet if he had really meant what he said last night! Strange that of all his words, these should remain so clearly: "This time it's a promise to me! — This time it is going to be kept."

The trowel hung suspended. Ciceley's face grew just a little dreamy. For the first time in all that troubled morning, her thoughts were away from the girls. "Pshaw!" she exclaimed, under her breath. "Of course it was mere bravado. He's promised it a hundred times before. Jim couldn't really — Poor silly Jim!" The brown head under its faded hat tossed with a hint of coquetry. Though all the rest of her universe should shift, here was a point of immobility. No matter what his absurd, sporadic efforts to escape, no matter how she chose to treat him, Jim was her own, her bonded slave.

A specially vigorous dig emphasized her conviction of this sentiment. The contents of the trowel were scattered high in air. Then, with a stifled shriek, Ciceley sat back to her heels, quivering with repugnance. She had bisected a large, pink earthworm!

The redbird, catching the wriggling sight, echoed her cry with a note of ecstasy. Two bounds on the spring wires of his feet set him upon a partial victim. Ciceley again fled.

When, with a little hysterical laugh, she came back to a more rational present, she found herself leaning deep into the yielding pyramid of an arbor-vitæ bush. Though not particularly tall, its apex rose a foot above her. It was warm, resinous, caressing, — almost sentient. She held a flat spray against her face, loving it for its screening and its perfume.

She had moved forward, in the act of quitting it, when the sound of young voices coming from the direction of the house drove her back farther into her leafy tent.

The girls, their arms entwined, moved straight toward her. The curve of the driveway they followed would bring them almost within touch of her hand. She decided on the instant to remain in hiding. She was not ready to face them both, just now.

Sylvia was bareheaded, her brown curls lit to copper in the sun. Lucille, who took no chances with her marvellous complexion, wore a pale green "Dutch" bonnet tied with wide strings under her chin. Framed in its cool green shadow, the girl's face was more than ever like a perfect flower.

"There is no need of worrying about it any longer, Sylvia," she was saying in her clear, decisive voice. "You know that mother goes around the house looking like a scarecrow; and you were just as much annoyed, last night, as I was, to have those strangers see her."

"Still, — she is mother!" demurred little Sylvia, — a quaver in her voice that made the thrilled eaves-dropper long to rush forth, and clasp the speaker in her arms.

"Of course she is 'mother.' That's the whole trouble. If she wasn't, why should we care?" retorted Lucille, with a logic as pitiless as it was unanswerable.

"When it comes to Uncle Jim," she pursued scornfully, "the sight of his baggy trousers and grease-spotted waistcoat literally makes me ill. I am not sorry for a single word I said to him last night. The idea of his trying to bully me! I only wish I had said more."

The abysmal silence of the little one, following this spirited declaration, might well have been filled with conjectures as to what more her sister could have said.

"I'm tired of seeing the lovesick old thing about, anyway," was Lucille's next heartless asseveration. As an indication of the contempt in which she held the Colonel's middle-aged devotion, she flecked lightly a spray of the very shrub where Ciceley crouched.

"And furthermore," the clear young voice rang out, "I wish that mother would come to a decision for once in her life, and either send him away, or make up her mind to marry him."

Down its entire length the arbor vitæ shivered. Its denizen made a swift, indignant, forward step. The scorn in her daughter's voice, touching on Jim, was more than loyalty to that lifelong friend could bear. Words of remonstrance burned unuttered on her lips, as the two girls paced on.

Ciceley, now well in the open, watched their retreat. Even at the gate, in their pause over the lifting of the latch, not a backward glance was thrown.

For once in her life Ciceley trembled, not with timidity, but real anger. As if the girl's outrageous attack of the evening before had not been sufficient for rancour, here, under the open sky, with no excuse, provocation, or incentive, again she defiled Jim's deepest reserves with her levity. Again she was speaking, not only of him, but of her own mother with as little of tenderness or reverence as though it were Mammy and Uncle Snow.

Until last night's sinister awakening, Ciceley had believed Jim's secret inviolate. The shame of its open derision reflected on her. Truly, the time had come for Lucille's recalcitrant spirit to be given a curb. But anew came the blank query, "How?" Was Jim in the right when he said she could no longer, unaided, manage her children? Was he only too right when he called them "young pelicans"?

Ciceley glanced back to the house. Over the door, at this distance, the bronze, oval sign was a mere dot of darkness. Instinctively she pressed both hands on her breast. Yes, the image was true. No physical wounds would be more tangible than those Lucille's cruelty had dealt.

She lifted her head, looking around as if to assure herself that her environment, at least, should be familiar. Now she drew in long breaths. She must think now, as never before. Surely deep, prayerful thought would lead her to some resolution.

Careless of direction, she moved forward in reverie,

and stepped down to the long curving drive. It was deep in white sand. Each footprint so recently made by the girls had left a clear intaglio. Sub-consciously she followed in these, matching her small shoe first to one, then another. Her down-cast eyes, still for a time half unseeing, became of themselves, as it were, aware of a something in the tracks that was not just right. The sense of this vague incongruity teased her. Her deeper mental process resented the distraction, which, gaining strength, yet persisted. She frowned. Yes, there was something quite wrong with those tracks. Now, all at once, it was clear. One of the heels had run down. Run-down heels, if not straightened, would distort the wearer's ankles. Both of her girls had the feet of young thoroughbreds. Lucille was specially complacent about hers.

Ciceley stooped lower. All of her inner ratiocinations had fled. She felt that she must determine at once just which of the girls was wearing the menacing heel. Old Peter, the Hill cobbler, could fix it. She tracked it, step by step, and thus led, had come up to the gate.

Now, with a fling vital, imperious, compelling, the stirrup latch went back upon its boss. Ciceley, with a convulsive start, looked up. A lady was entering, a stranger, gowned in quiet though unmistakable elegance. Ciceley's first thought was one of conscious thankfulness that Lucille was away and could not score her with a look for her imprudence in being "caught " by so wonderful a visitor. Of course she was one of Lucille's new, fashionable friends!

But no, the slim, gracious figure, entirely at ease, kept swiftly on its forward course. There was no hesitation, as surely there would be on a first visit to a home entirely unfamiliar, especially at a chance encounter with an unknown hostess.

Now she was smiling directly into Ciceley's eyes. The charming face brightened with its certainty of welcome.

"Why, Sis, — dear little Sis!" she cried.

Then Ciceley knew.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JULIA STARTS SOMETHING

"JULE," cried out Ciceley, in a voice that splintered the tense silence. After, she stood there quivering. Astonishment, incredulity, and a thing that touched on fear, made of her face a veritable emotional playground.

Julia ran up to her, and, daring the frayed edges of the hat, leaned to bestow on either cheek a warm, deliberate kiss.

Ciceley submitted, half-uncomprehending, and then drew back, as if dimly conscious of wishing to retain a better focus upon the apparition, a clearer space of air in which to breathe. Though by her external senses she knew it to be Julia, something still deeper kept whispering that she might be harboring a phantasy. It was as if her cousin's youth, resuscitate and gloriously transfigured, had suddenly come back to find her old. Out of the sting of this revelation a single question flew, "Has Jim seen you yet?"

A queer light danced for an instant behind Julia's spotted veil. Then she began to laugh. Among her social tenets one of the most successful was "Whenever you find yourself in a tight place, — laugh!"

This she now did and at such length that Ciceley began to display an added phase of stupefaction. She could not know that behind the spangled screen of artificial merriment, Julia's quick mind was undergoing a series of vaudeville transformations. At last the chosen guise stepped out.

"The idea of your asking me if I have seen any one else before coming to you!" she cried, with tender reproach. "Why, Sis, from the very minute I turned my face south, I said to myself, 'First of all I shall go straight to Little Sunshine.' Now I am really here," she skurried on, not daring to draw breath, "it is lovelier and dearer than all my homesick dreams of it. You too, dear little Sis, are sweeter and prettier than dreams have had you. I am so glad to be with you once more. Are you not just a little glad to see me?"

"Of course," stammered Ciceley, her instinct of hospitality beating a pathway through chaos. "But, — but why didn't you write anybody? When did you get here? What — what on earth have you done to yourself?"

Again Julia laughed, but now it was spontaneous. Her purpose had already been achieved. From Ciceley's maze of questioning more than one clue of safety could be drawn. Grasping the first, and assuming an air of reproof, humorously exaggerated, she flung out, "And have you the nerve, Ciceley Taliaferro, to ask me why I didn't write?"

Ciceley's eyes fell.

"Well, never mind. I forgive you. I am too happy right now to hold a grudge against anybody."

Here she caught Ciceley's arm in hers. "Come, let's go in, so we can talk."

For a few paces they moved silently toward the house. Julia was sending her smiling gaze this way and that, touching each instant some long forgotten object with the light of reminiscence. For Ciceley there was but one thing visible, the shimmering gray figure at her side.

"Oh, Jule," she finally exclaimed, in a tone that held a sort of naïve and childish despair, "you are prettier than you ever were as a girl."

"Now don't you go trying to turn my gray head! I was just looking at the dear, rose-covered summer-house, and thinking what centuries it had been since we used to go over your lessons there."

"Gray! Where's any gray?" demanded Ciceley, peering up at what tendrils could be seen beneath the close-fitting toque, at the side of which perched airily a single long stiff quill of white. Then, with apparent irrelevance, "Where is your boy?"

"He rode out with me, but I sent him on to Stag Harbor, to give Jim a surprise. He'll be here later. Just at first I had a fancy for seeing you alone."

"Yes, that is better," approved Ciceley, with an under satisfaction more obvious than she realized. "My girls have just stepped up to the post-office."

This fact she stated in a composed, maternal way, as if it had been her errand on which the girls were sent.

"I'm glad to sort of get *used* to you before they come back," she went on, but the attempted laugh ended in an uncertain quaver. "I don't seem able

to get used to you. It's not only that you look so different. Even the sound of your voice is changed."

"Oh, just a taint of Anglophobia," tossed Julia lightly, "I'll shed it soon enough down here!"

As the front steps were reached, Ciceley stopped short, her eyes brightening with mischief. "Let's go round by the kitchen and see if Mammy Nycie will recognize you."

Hand in hand, giggling in the subdued, anticipatory manner of naughty schoolgirls, the two contrastingly attired figures, one an advance of modishness from the Rue de la Paix, the other a shapeless bundle of rejected garments, ran through the hedges and without ceremony into the unsuspecting Mammy's domain.

The old woman was seated on a stool facing the door. She held precariously on her fat knees a large tin dish-pan of "cow peas" which she was shelling. The process had swung, as was usual in the performance of her homely tasks, into a definite rhythm, accompanied by the contralto humming of a gospel tune.

At the abrupt incursion, the singer glanced up frowning. Such lack of ceremony had generally heralded the advent of one or both of "dem gals."

Mammy's lips formed themselves quickly for a sharp reproach. She had warned them too often against "bustin' in on her" like this. Once she had hinted darkly at a possible result of "nervous perspiration."

But the lips so instinctively relaxed widened and stayed apart, and seemingly had no power to close. The large eyes rolled, and then fixed themselves on the

smiling and already half-familiar ones in the doorway. Swift certainty flashed an electric spark between, and in her wonder of recognition, Mammy gave forth a cry, and threw both hands in air.

At this the pan slipped down, striking the bare floor with a frightful clatter. The peas, both shelled and unshelled, skipped wide, heaping themselves into games of vegetable jackstraws.

"Good Gawd A'mighty!" breathed out the awed one, when she could speak. "Ef it ain't little Miss Julia Wickford done turnt into de Queen ob Sheeby!"

At this Julia, laughing hugely, wheeled round to Ciceley in order to share the delight. Mammy's eyes went there too. Then slowly the childish, vaguely-puzzled gaze returned to the radiant visitor.

"Well, this is better than we could have hoped for, isn't it, Sis?" cried out the quick-witted Julia. "Do you know, Mammy, you recognized me a whole lot sooner than Miss Ciceley did? But I am sorry about the peas. Let me help you gather them up."

Not for nothing had Julia been born a Southerner. At the first tentative reach of her gloved hand toward a heap of shells, Mammy, with one bound, came literally and figuratively into her own. "He-ah! He-ah, now! Miss Julia," she remonstrated, shooing the would-be helper away as she might a hen, "you stop dat grubbin' on my flo'. Dis ain't no place fer you, no-how."

"That means that we're to get out," said Ciceley merrily. "Come on."

They entered by the back door of the house, Ciceley instinctively leading toward the dining room. A

pleasant low fire was at home. Over it and the big mantel hung a large gold-framed portrait of Henry Dering, done in oils. The pictured face, under the dual lighting of morning and the reflected glow of the fire, showed a mysterious animation. The dark, narrow eyes menaced the doorway. The lips, red as they were in life, thin and subtly ironic, flickered an instant, then shut close. The whole tense countenance now seemed to be watching Julia.

Ciceley had not glanced up. The dominant presence had with her become a habit. But Julia, deliberately halting, challenged the cold eyes with her own. On her lips too came the ghost of a scornful flicker. "You varnished hypocrite!" she thought.

Becoming conscious of the other's fixity, Ciceley, still sparkling with merriment, looked round. As if by a stroke of grim magic, the bright face sobered to the image of inconsolable grief. She crept back to Julia softly, leaning against her arm. A sigh, long-drawn, plaintive, and filled with resignation, issued through quivering lips. Now the brown eyes, adoringly lifted, fawned on the painted icon.

Julia encircled the drooping figure, holding it close as she mused aloud, "What a great comfort it must be to Henry, even if he's dead, to know that he left behind him such a flattering portrait. I really think I shall have to look up the artist. You remember how dreadfully one-sided poor Henry's nose was? In his picture it is made to appear quite straight."

The sigh broke into a horrified gasp. The eyes fell suddenly, — two birds at a single shot. Pushing her-

self off, Ciceley fixed them in shrinking incredulous dismay on she who had uttered blasphemy.

But that artless person, smiling and singularly self-possessed, was already moving forward to the fireplace.

"May I sit here? Is it dear old Jim's special corner still?" she enquired in a breath, waving a gloved hand in the direction of the leather chair.

Ciceley replied to both queries by a dazed nod. For a few moments she was literally without power to move. Her nightmare of unreality was beginning to creep in from a new quarter. Was she never again to feel natural, or had something at the very foundation of her intelligence gone wrong? Somewhere she had read that a too-poignant mental strain produced phenomena called hallucinations. One saw and heard things that were not there. Surely it could be only incipient insanity that evoked what had seemed to be Julia's recent remarks. There was something said about Henry's nose. Desperately the little widow again looked at the portrait. There was the profaned member, Praxitelean in symmetry.

She drew in a breath of relief, throwing at the same time a glance of indignation toward Julia, who chanced to be at that moment calmly removing her gloves.

Ciceley went back to the straight nose-bridge, clinging as to a life-saving spar. She whispered aloud to it her belief, her undying loyalty. Every one knew that Henry was beautiful! And yet — and yet — what was this hideous clamor of reason, this stripping of memory that now shrieked to her, "Each of your husband's many photographs, and this portrait as

well, were most carefully posed to secure the one straight line of his crooked nose, and you know it"?

Until this dreadful moment, her memory of the distortion had been as utterly buried as some trivial incident of her personal infancy. She would have sworn on many bibles that Henry's nose had been a model of its kind. Not only pride and deep sentiment were affronted. There was a tang, as of ridicule, that poisoned her very soul.

"What is the matter?" now questioned Julia. "Is there some housekeeping you must attend to, before we can have our talk? If so, just forget me till it is over. I'm utterly 'comfy' here."

She looked it. Two perfectly shod feet were crossed far in front of her. With little luxurious, nestling movements she was adjusting her slim figure to the responsive chair. On her bright face was a smile of unmistakable content.

"N-n-no," stammered Ciceley, feeling more than ever that she had been the sport of a sinister delusion. "There is nothing to do just yet."

"Good!" beamed the visitor. "Then hurry and pull up your little rocking-chair. You see I remember it, too! I want you quite close, — close enough to lean out and touch you. And what do you say to taking off that barbed-wire hat? It has nearly put out one of my eyes already."

Peace and good will chimed silver in her voice.

Ciceley, advancing like an automaton, obeyed all behests as one under hypnosis.

"We are really together at last," approved Julia as the other took her seat. "Here goes my hat, too."

With quick, deft movements she untied her veil, extracted two jewelled hatpins, thrust them back at random into the hollow shell, and then tossed the dainty entanglement out across Ciceley's shoulder to the dining room table.

"Now, little Sis!" With the initiatory words she bent forward, taking the small brown hands in her own. "I want you to tell me everything about yourself, what you've been doing all these years, what are your plans for the future. How this funny adventure we call life looks to you from our present viewpoint of middle-aged perspective, — well, in fact, everything!"

The gray eyes were kind, but compelling. Ciceley made no attempt just yet to meet them. After a moment of embarrassed hesitation, in which her hands had been slowly withdrawn, she replied, "There's so little to tell, Jule. The girls —"

"Girls!" broke in Julia. "They can come later, — in fact they are coming. This is our one little talk *entre nous*. I'm not to be thrown off the track by your girls!"

"But," faltered Ciceley, "there doesn't seem to be any me apart from them."

"That's where you make your mistake. There is. Lots more than ever before. Why, don't you realize, Ciceley Taliaferro, that with very little effort you could be prettier and more attractive than you've ever been?"

The dark, startled eyes, now uplifted, shrank with a look of pain. For an instant it seemed as if Julia mocked her. Then with an effort she drew herself

well up, and said a little primly, "You must remember, Jule, that having two daughters nearly grown is a very different thing from having one boy. It is all very well for you to wear beautiful dresses and look so young, but what would people think of me, if after all this time I should begin to fix up, and try to be pretty?"

"What do they think of you now?" questioned Julia, with disconcerting abruptness. As the other gasped, she thrust in more deeply, "What do your girls think?"

Now the brown head went down. In the big room there was silence.

"Sis, little Sis," whispered Julia, "don't think I want to hurt you. The wounds of a friend — I've known and loved you so long." The charming voice stopped suddenly, but its echoes thrilled.

"Even though Wick was a boy, I had problems. There were things that the big, outside world had to teach me. Won't you tell me yours?"

But Ciceley remained wordless. Even to this close friend she could not admit her need.

"Old age has gone out of fashion," the other went on in a lighter tone. "Nobody needs to look old or to feel old until well after fifty, and by that time other interests have come. It is good for one's growing children to keep up with things. There's so much to do for them, so many fine, tactful ways of helping, but it can be done only by remaining at their side, and not slumping back helplessly into the slough of a former generation. Don't you see this for yourself, dear?"

Ciceley shook her head. From a low, choking

murmur, the listener believed she caught the phrase "too late."

"There's nothing that's ever too late!" pronounced Julia. "Nothing, that is, but actually being dead. It is the one finality, and — it should be. You are not out of your thirties yet, Ciceley. That sounds a mere infant to me. Your hair hasn't a single white thread, and your cheek is as smooth as a rose. You are lovely, quite lovely — if only —" This time the shake of the head had more vigor. Noting it, Julia smiled.

"Surely," she urged, and now partially to voice her own thoughts, "at your age, before forty, you cannot have persuaded yourself that no personal joy is left! Every one dreams. Dreams are the ichor of being. I remember once a brilliant young thinker and student saying to me, 'The chlorophyll of the soul is anticipation. Its sun is hope. Without them, the spirit dies.' If you don't know what chlorophyll is, — I didn't, of course, — I will tell you. It is that marvelous green of all living plants that turns the sun's rays into energy. It might almost be used as a term for 'life.' Now you are not dead. There must be something hidden away, some dream of happiness that you take out when no one is looking. Yes, I can feel that there is. Your face shows it. Tell me about it, dear, tell me. The telling will help."

The tender low voice had betrayed no faltering, but at Ciceley's slow, upraised look, one of the ringed hands gripped hard the arm of the Colonel's chair.

"Yes, Julie dear, there is something," Ciceley whispered. "I am not ashamed — only — only —"

"Well — you queer little soul, well, only —?"

"It would sound so crude, so indelicate, to tell."

"Even to me, your big sister?"

"Well, then," cried Ciceley, spurred to a sudden courage. "Maybe I can, to you. It's grandchildren!"

For once Julia Preston's control fled in panic. "Grandchildren!" she echoed. After a struggle for breath, in a louder voice, "Grandchildren!" Then she collapsed. Prone in the chair she began to laugh hysterically, as though she could never stop.

"I didn't intend being funny," suggested the other.

"Forgive me, my dear. I'm utterly disgusting," gasped Julia, as she fumbled about for her handkerchief. "I just couldn't help — it was so unexpected."

"What did you think, then?" probed the indignant Ciceley, conserving her new rôle of mentor. "Have you never, yourself, dreamed of having them?"

This was the carrying of war into Africa.

"Have I? Not dreamed, merely. I am determined I shall!" home-thrust Julia, rallying her bright cohorts of defence. "That's one thing I've brought Wick back here for. You know how I've always loved children. I wish I had had six. I adore them from the moment they enter this world, blind as young kittens, their pink fists curled as if they realized what a fight was on. I revel in the smell of the fuzzy flannel bunches. Violet powder — paregoric — catnip — even asafetida is sweet when it emanates from them! I'd rather kiss that velvet hollow at the back of a baby's neck than win the Derby. But, all the same, —"

Here she leaned back to regard more at leisure her now half-subdued and wholly-approving listener. The gray eyes sparkled mischief. "Why hurry on what is sure? A woman can have grandchildren when she can't have anything else."

"But — but —" fended Ciceley, blinking before the new flash.

Julia's laugh checked her. "Suppose, just for argument, we look to the future. We are conspirators. All our dark plots and our secrecies bend toward making us grandmamas."

Again came the pause, into which Ciceley, after a feeble resistance, sent a small "yes."

"Well, in the meantime, as an intelligent preparation for welcoming them, are we to sit still, rusting, letting our sympathies as well as our muscles grow stiff? Shall we choose to appear to the newcomers as a mere inert mass of wrinkles, surmounted by gold-rimmed specs, with perhaps the allurements of biscuit and tea-cakes suspended from our feeble anatomies in a black bag? That's the conventional picture I'll admit, — Grandma in spectacles near a table, an open Bible, a sprig of rosemary, and a window! The light of a better world touches already, with its sacred light, Grandma's white hairs. Pathetic, now, isn't it! Rot! sentimental idiocy! pure laziness! One should keep living as long as they are here! And the less one is tread down by hungry generations, the more respect those generations have for you. As for myself," vaunted Julia, "I warn you right now that I expect to play tennis with my grandson, and beat him, and to learn all the new dances with my granddaughter!"

She threw back her spirited head in defiance to meet the horrified objections Ciceley was sure to give. But Ciceley was not even listening, — at least not to her. One hand was now raised, claiming silence. The brown eyes turned away toward the front of the house; her face held a brightness that Julia had not seen before. But behind the swift radiance a cloud of apprehension passed.

“There! I was certain — the stirrup latch. It is the girls.”

Julia sprang to her feet with the stab of a sudden impatience. “Is Sis hopeless, after all?” she thought. Then as a second inner reflection, “I haven’t had the chance to say a single word for Jim.”

“Shall we go to the door and meet them?” she suggested, knowing it to be Ciceley’s desire.

“Yes. Will you? We’ll surprise them like we did Mammy.” Already she was up and at the dining-room door.

“Not exactly as we did old Mammy,” said the other to herself a little grimly, and followed, wondering what new impressions were in store.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GIRLS

FROM the front door, as the two friends emerged, the girls were at first invisible. Ciceley reached out and caught her cousin's hand. Her own was trembling. Her whole figure had grown tense, thrilled with expectancy. No honeymoon bride ever watched with more eagerness for her first glimpse of a returning mate.

From around the fringed edges of a great pampas cluster, halfway along the curved drive, the two slim figures showed. Julia's quick glance, seizing them, touched the pink face of little Sylvia, and then flashed in an instant to Lucille. There her gaze hung fixed and incredulous.

She had been well-prepared for prettiness, even to an unusual degree. Jim's muttered objurgation, "Pretty is as pretty does," told her more than any careless praise. But at first sight of Lucille's flawless loveliness, her heart seemed to stop. "There's not an acknowledged beauty to compare with her," was the traveler's astonished decree. Close on the heels of it came the thought, "Poor little Sis!"

Lucille, glancing up, met the appraising eyes

fairly. The little one, seeing a visitor, dimpled and flushed, nestling close, like a child, to the stronger arm.

After one long grave look, Lucille continued to move forward, tall, slender, deliberate, with no more self-consciousness than a flower. Her rhythm did not alter by a breath. Julia instinctively thought of tall lilies, of cliffs rendered white in the moon, of poised, jewelled coronets. "Heavens!" she murmured, half-audibly, "surely I'm dreaming. No living girl can be as perfect as this. What a beauty!"

Ciceley had watched Julia intently. Now a low cry, instinct with triumph, broke from her lips. Here in the flesh was her warrant, here her bright refutation against an absurd idolatry. Who would not idolize such beings? And Julia had keen eyes to see.

Spurred by excitement, the mother ran forward. At the top of the steps she bent down, curving low, her impatience silently urging the approaching figures to haste. Lucille, though apparently oblivious of her mother, noticeably slackened her speed. Her head was held high, the eyes, under drooping white lids, were cast down. Sylvia, clinging and fluttering at her side, might not have been in existence.

After a moment of quivering expectation, Ciceley stood up. Her radiant expression sobered. Despite the wide space all about them, the sky overhead, the long pillared cloisters of "gallery" stretching to right and left, a swift circling eddy, as it were, of more highly charged atmosphere, — an influence at once sinister and compelling, — swept round the

focussing group, and enclosed it in its own definite dimension.

Rasped by the fret of it, Sylvia, breaking away from her sister, ran like a fawn up the steps. Ciceley's arms were ready. After an instantaneous but passionate embrace, she thrust the small figure backward toward her cousin with the words, "This is my little one, Sylvia."

Julia accepted an outstretched, small hand almost gravely. "It is Ciceley herself," thought the woman. "It is the core of the mother's heart."

Before she could find words to speak, Lucille, still calm, still reserved, stood in some way just beside them. Julia's eyes turned to her. Neither extended a hand, and the look in the two pairs of eyes held so long that Ciceley, becoming embarrassed, started an aimless chattering.

"Don't you know yet who it is, girls? Haven't you guessed? Why — just try to think. Lucille, you surely remember!"

"I'm sorry," replied the tall girl, using her voice of water that rippled below thin ice, "I am waiting, you see."

The words were courteous, her manner that of a gracious young empress. Yet she had managed to infuse into both something of stinging rebuke. A swift, scornful glance at her mother, lashing at once the whole figure, made every stain, every snag in the shabby old garments dart forth a clamoring head.

Julia's mouth tightened. "I am your cousin, Julia Preston," stated she. Ice clinked here, too. "Your mother and I, in our girlhood, were like sisters.

I've been living abroad for so long it is only to be expected that her children should not remember me."

"Ah! Now I recall you quite clearly," vouchsafed Lucille. "Mother, and Uncle Jim too, have spoken of you often."

Her smile had the chill of perfection; and the hand now conventionally stretched forth might have served as a model in the show-window of a manicure establishment.

Julia just touched the white fingers. Here was the problem, indeed; here gentle Ciceley's crucible. Through the sense of hostility that quickened in Julia's veins ran a long thrill of exultation. Dearly she loved a fight, and here before her stood a keen opponent, — only a girl indeed, but, as the other judged, with equipment to test all her own mature powers. It seemed almost too good to be true that on the sleepy old Hill had been forged such a blade. Reason and justice and defence of a weaker matched against panoplied selfishness! Her high spirit loved the tall girl for her very defiance. She yearned for the combat.

"*I* remember you too, Cousin Julia," the little one dimpled. At the words she crept close, quite between Lucille and Julia, and sent up a shy, long-lashed look. "You gave me the prettiest doll I ever had. She's named Lady Julia. I've got her yet. Where's Wick?"

"Bless your brown eyes!" cried out Julia. "So you remember Wick, too?"

Sylvia nodded, her face more than ever a rose.

"You will be stopping for lunch, Cousin Julia?" the other girl's clear voice enquired.

"If your mother will do me the honor."

"Why, of course you will stay," fluttered Ciceley. "The idea of Lucille's asking!"

Julia could not deny herself a swift, almost malicious look. Lucille, as though no one had spoken, had begun calmly untying her bonnet strings. Her indifferent face did not change.

"Nevertheless," chuckled the inner Julia, "she does not miss a trick."

As the four entered the big, pleasant dining room, constraint all at once seemed to vanish. Julia had set herself the task of subjugation. All of her marvellous best was consciously put forth. Soon Ciceley and Sylvia were laughing until it was hard to tell one happy face from the other. Lucille, instinctively wary, kept watch, but there were moments when even her defences went down.

Julia's delight in the girl and her angry impatience at the way Ciceley was ignored kept her own senses keyed. Under her breath she found herself hurling anathemas into which, with disconcerting frequency, fragments of panegyric cut. "You iceberg! Regan and Goneril fused into rose-colored flint!" were shattered to atoms with the intruding thought, — "But look at the line of her chin as it melts to the throat!"

Little by little her restless intelligence ferreted out chinks in the girl's crystal armor. In one interval of comparative lack of restraint, Lucille admitted her fondness for the reading of novels.

"She always is reading — even in bed," supplemented the little one, in a tone indicating her childish resentment against the isolating practice.

"What else is there to do?" parried Lucille.

Her eyes, discontented and questioning, went straight to Julia. That astute person, after a lightning calculation of probable effect, permitted herself a quick nod of sympathy. "I know," she just breathed. Now, again sparkling, she rapidly mentioned the titles of a few recent books which Lucille would have been apt to have read. The lure was successful. Lucille, now almost vivacious, mentioned the names of the characters. Julia apparently was on terms of the closest intimacy with them all. She began to talk of them, criticising, commenting, laughing, as though they were beings of flesh, who might, at a wave of her magical wand, spring into sight.

Even the two other listeners, neither of whom ever read, found themselves as eager as if personal acquaintances were involved. From her gay discourse upon printed heroes, Julia now veered, with the wrist of a master of fencing, into the more intimate topic of living ones. Of course such dear girls had admirers — dozens of them, no doubt! She wanted to hear all about them. Nothing on earth was quite so interesting. It was the one disappointment of her life that Wick had no sweetheart. And with the girls, was there by chance, — with either, — an already definite, preferred Lothario?

Sylvia, all blushes and radiant confusion, cried out denial. "They had their boy friends," she confessed. "All the girls had. Some of them, the

boys," she paused to explain, "had been awfully nice, bringing them candy and music, and taking them about to parties. But as for there being a special one —" A violent shake of brown curls ended her statement.

Ciceley drank in every syllable. Next to the fact of their beauty, the well-known "popularity" of her daughters was Ciceley's greatest pride. All pretty girls should have beaux.

Julia now turned with a deepening interest to the silent elder girl. Lucille had neither flushed nor smiled.

"We have to accept such attentions," she answered, "simply because there's no choice. The men down here are cut from a single coarse pattern. They never have seen, read, or thought anything worth while in their lives. Their one thought of a girl is a silly creature, open-mouthed as a young mocking bird for their compliments. When we do get a glimpse of real men," here a swift frown of resentment darkened, "it only shows up the stupidity of our usual crowd. I am sick of it all!" she cried out with a sudden and most unexpected vehemence. "I wish — oh, I wish —"

She caught herself back. Julia could see the tightening of reins. The long arms had been partially uplifted, giving the look of wings. Now they fell back. "But what is the use of wishing," came in a low, muttering voice so withheld that none but the visitor heard it.

"Don't be too sure there's no use," whispered Julia as guardedly. Leaving the molecule of yeast to

ferment, she passed on, apparently in unthinking caprice, to a brilliant recital of her experiences in England. She had visited at many of the country places so well known that their names had a part in novels. Titles and personages fell as in a shower of gems from her mouth. Lucille again listened breathlessly. Now Julia told them of her presentation at the English court.

"And speaking of courts," she broke in, addressing herself directly to Ciceley, "do you realize, Madame Dering, that one of your faithful adorers is quite a *persona grata* at Buckingham Palace?"

"Mine! What do you mean?" stammered Ciceley.

"As usual, just what I say. This time I can give it a name. Mark Stanwood."

"Mark Stanwood!" echoed Ciceley, beginning to dimple and smile. "That little boy. I had forgotten the dear child was alive."

"Not much 'dear child' about the Honorable Mark now," bantered Julia. "He's a dashing young guardsman, frightfully good-looking and nearly as tall as Jim, — that is," she corrected hastily, "as I remember Jim."

"Uncle Jim's awfully fat now," affirmed little Sylvia, but fortunately no one heeded her. Lucille's gray eyes were twin stars.

"After Mark's father died here," continued the speaker, "and his mother decided to return for good to England, two cousins of theirs were killed in South Africa. This brought Mark a pot of money. Besides, it left only one life between him and the title."

"Would you mind telling us," came in an awe-stricken voice from Lucille, "what title?"

"Sir Mark Stanwood of Stanwood Manor," pronounced Julia grandiloquently. "Of course," she said lightly in afterthought, "the title's not much. Only a baronetcy." One would have thought from her gesture that baronetcies buzzed about like mosquitoes. "But the Manor is a show place, and the income quite dazzling. There's many an English girl wasting her time in the attempt to be made Lady Stanwood."

"But, Cousin Julia," asked Sylvia, "what did you mean about his being an adorer of mother's? Why, mother —"

"As a boy he was crazy about her," came the quick statement. "He used to follow her about like a dog. He admitted to me, over there, that when he heard she had married your father, he very nearly threw himself into the Thames. He's cursed with fidelity, poor man! I honestly believe that it's only to see his old love, that he's on his way to America now."

"On his way *now*!" echoed Ciceley in horror.

"Why, yes. Didn't I mention it? When he heard Wick and I were coming, and that you were still unmarried — Well, the fact is, he asked me to — er — well, to speak of him to you — make the path clear, as it were."

"I wish, Jule," now said the beet-colored Ciceley, with a pathetic attempt at dignity, "that you wouldn't joke about such absurdities, especially before the girls. It makes me feel — Why, Mark is a child to me."

"But, dear, I am not in the least joking," protested the other, with wide-opened, innocent eyes. "I'm utterly serious, and so is poor Mark. He's only a few years your junior, and, besides, it's quite a fad now among Englishmen to marry their grandmothers." At the last word she gave a small, meaning grimace.

"Excuse me," gasped Ciceley, routed with slaughter, "I must see about lunch — I'll — I won't be a minute —" As she fled, the tormenter leaned back. On her face was a deep satisfaction.

Now Lucille rose. She betrayed not a hint of disturbance. Each supple movement flowed into the next with a quiet and measured grace. "You'll excuse me too, Cousin Julia?" she suggested sweetly. "I'd like to hang up this bonnet and brush my hair before luncheon."

Julia bowed graciously. The smile on her face, as it lifted, was as impersonally correct as Lucille's own. They might have been two ladies in waiting, just brushing each other in the royal antechamber.

For Julia, at least, the whole situation was gilded by humor. Lucille, it was evident, had no such redress. All that pertained to herself became, by that fact, of deep moment, centering at once her whole conscious universe.

Julia knew so much by instinct. Watching the poise of the head, the light, swinging carelessness of her slim figure as she walked down the room, all of the elder woman's fine sympathy rushed in to shame her, to tell her anew how unequal the contest.

"And yet," cried the knight errant in Julia, "even

a thoroughbred is nobler for taming. It is not merely for Ciceley, but for the good of this lovely, defiant thing too, that a whip and the spurs must be used."

Sylvia, during the skirmish which ended in two separate flights, not knowing what else to do, had remained seated. Her eyes, opened wide and obviously imploring, had followed her mother, blinking with sudden dismay as the door closed. Now, at a different angle, they vainly adhered to Lucille. When that source of defence and initiative was likewise removed, the little one, shrinking as if she had been a small, cornered rabbit, brought her eyes round to her companion.

Julia was ready for her.

"Come to me *in*-stantly, Sylvia."

The child, although palpitant, sped.

"Do you know, you dear kitten, what all along I've been dying to do?"

"No," faltered Sylvia.

"This!" cried out Julia, and flung both arms tightly around her, straining her close. "You're a lamb. You're a darling," she murmured. "If you had been my little girl, I know I should have eaten you up long ago, just as I nibble rose-leaves."

"Oh — oh!" blushed and twittered the small one, nestling down nearer.

"You're just a pink nosegay. You ought to be in a vase now, sitting on somebody's table. Sylvia, I want you to like me — a lot! I have reasons!"

"I do like you now — I just love you," cried Sylvia, and, at the words, turned round to fling

herself once and for all into idolatry. Later she ventured, still shyly, "Cousin Julia."

"Yes, kitten."

"Why did you tease mother so about that Mark man? Didn't you see she was afraid Lucille was going to make fun of her?"

"Was she now!" marvelled the other, hiding her mischievous eyes in brown curls.

"Yes," nodded Sylvia impressively.

"Lucille's got a few things to learn," was Julia's next comment. "And the first is that her mother is still a young and pretty woman."

Sylvia drew back, the better to see her companion's face. She started to laugh, thinking the words a new jest, but at sight of the earnestness in the gray eyes so near, sobered instantly into a puzzled stare.

"We know she's pretty and sweet," decoyed Julia. "Don't we, you dear?"

"Ye-e-s. Were you and mother really girls together?"

"Of course. Do I seem all that older?"

"You! I was thinking of mother."

A curious light came into Julia's face, then as swiftly as Sylvia's laugh had faded, it too disappeared.

"Get down," she commanded, with a brusque affectation of anger, "I won't have so stupid a child on my lap. I am years and years older than Ciceley, and I never was, or will be, one tenth as good-looking."

Though Sylvia apologized, and clung, pleading for forgiveness, the irate one took her by both arms, and slid her down bodily to the hearth-rug. Over

her she stood, menacing fiercely. "I'm going to find your mother," she declared. "Even though she doesn't belong in the cradle, like a few others I could mention, she at least has a little sense." She strode off, not heeding the cries of apparent distress that arose from the hearth, nor deigning a glance toward the giggling, impenitent culprit.

Just without the door, she laughed softly. "That will do you, little kitten, for a first inoculation of common sense," she remarked. Then her voice rang out clearly, "Ciceley! Oh, Sis! Where are you?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JULIA OUTLINES A CAMPAIGN

SELDOM had luncheon at Little Sunshine proceeded with such brightness and laughter. Seldom had Henry Dering's portrait fixed its glazed eyes on so many happy faces. Into the stagnant waters of the usual, a fresh and revivifying energy had been thrown.

Mammy bore dishes in, smiling; and, with a broader grin, waddled out kitchenward for more. Over and over again Julia asserted, — and always where Mammy could hear, — that cooking like this made all of the royal tables of Europe seem like so many horse-troughs of bran.

After the meal, the four, by unanimous impulse, moved toward the long front "gallery", where now the October sun heaped up great stores of evanescent gold. Julia plunged into it, holding her arms wide, and drawing in breaths of warm radiance, as though it had been wine.

"They don't know — the poor things over there in England — what real sunshine can be," she declared. "For days at a time you can trace where the sun is by only a dull sort of gleam, just as if on a huge, tarnished pewter dish somebody

had begun to polish a single spot, and turned away in disgust. When, once in a fortnight or so it really does shine, it is less an event than an emotion."

Disdaining the suggestion of a chair, she threw herself down to the steps, where, after an instant, the others laughingly grouped themselves. It was here that the Colonel and Wick found them, — at least, found the girls and their mother, — for even before the stirrup latch could be lifted, Julia, covertly on watch, had heard them coming, and sped down the drive like a girl.

"Show more surprise, Jim," she ordered breathlessly, when well within hearing. "Open your eyes wide, — no, wider! Your mouth, too! Remember you've not seen me for ages! Well, if there isn't old Rover, — a new incarnation, of course, but, to all practical purposes — *Jim!* Now stand still, throw up your hands and say, 'God bless my soul!' You're making a mess of your part. The first question Ciceley asked me was whether I had seen you first. I had to — evade!" she laughed ringingly. "There! That's much better. Now pump my hands up and down frantically, as you used to do the Richmond Hill church organ. Good, couldn't be better! That will get Ciceley all right!"

"After this painful display of a parent's duplicity," murmured Wick in a mournful aside to the Colonel, "do you wonder I'm old and sedate for my years?"

"Oh, go climb a tree, little boy!" grimaced Julia. "This is a grown-up affair."

The three chaffing merrily, with Rover displaying his joy by the performance of weird canine

gymnastics, moved toward the waiting group on the steps. Julia felt that she knew the appraisal in Lucille's calm eyes as she watched Wick approaching. Among other useful attainments Julia had learned how to see everything while appearing to notice nothing. She waited, with intense curiosity, for the expression on Wick's face when he should get his first glimpse of Lucille.

It was quite as anticipated, — a swift look of incredulous wonder, a second, more searching glance, a low exclamation, the lips formed to a sort of soundless "Whew!" and then forced self-control to blot the offence of staring. And also she saw, and was well pleased thereby, that after Wick's pleasant, conventional greetings, and the three handshakes, impartially bestowed, it was at the side of little Sylvia he remained.

Ciceley's excited phrases and questionings were all for Jim, with Julia as objective. "Just look at her, Jim," she repeated, many times over. "Isn't she the most wonderful thing! I feel and look eighty beside her!"

The steps were abandoned. Verandah rocking-chairs were drawn into a convivial ring. After a rather short interval, Julia stood up, declaring that she must go in to fetch her hat.

"Your hat!" echoed Ciceley, while Jim contributed a sound of protesting dismay. "You're not thinking of going this soon!"

Julia assured them regretfully that going was the one thing she was of necessity driven to consider. It was a frightfully hard thing to do, she averred, but

there chanced to be letters, tiresome letters, some of them of business importance, which must be written in time to catch the next post.

Her manner was suave and convincing, in spite of the fact that she was assiduous in avoiding the twinkle of her son's eyes. These two knew each other appallingly well.

"But, Mater, —" he now cried out, forcing her attention. Then, as suddenly, he stopped.

"There's not the least need of your coming along, Wick," she flung round instantly. Now she could look at him, and did so, in roguish satisfaction. Honors were easy between them. "You just stay where you are. That is," she added, with a smile for the little hostess, "if Ciceley is good enough to put up with you."

Before Ciceley could speak, a low, breathless "Please!" came from Sylvia.

Wick flushed like a schoolgirl. "May I stay, Cousin Ciceley?"

At her cordial assent, and further to voice his felicity, he stated with emphasis, "After that, don't you know, I should jolly well need to be blasted away!"

Lucille and her mother were already smiling. Their quick deepening of amusement might well have been passed. But Sylvia, emitting one choked gurgle of delight, bent herself over, rocking with violence to and fro, in her effort to restrain a paroxysm of mirth. It was useless; the laughter rang out like the chiming of elves in a glade.

Wick's happy flush went deeper. Boyish wrath shot from his pleasant gray eyes, and his head went high.

"Was I by way of being funny?" he questioned stiffly.

"No! Y-e-es. Oh, please do forgive me!" tinkled the naughty one. "I know I am being most dreadfully rude. It was 'awfter', and 'blawst' that just made me — I couldn't help —" Here the bright current, striking the rocks anew, dashed into rainbows of merriment.

"Oh," said the boy, now joining the chorus, "it was only my English accent. I don't mind that!"

When Julia emerged, veiled and hatted, she walked straight to Jim. Wick had of course risen. Ciceley was standing near. The Colonel, noting the purposeful look in Julia's face, moved uneasily in his chair, and then he too rose.

"Will you walk down to the car with me, Jim?" asked Julia. "As I told you-all, one of my letters concerns business. There seems to be a bit of a tangle. I want Jim's advice."

Ciceley's upturned face, which at the beginning of the little speech had been eager, sobered at close of it into chagrin. She had only been waiting a pause to suggest that she too should walk down to the car-line, leaving the 'young folks' to themselves. Julia's words pushed her back as one pushes a child.

"Well, I do hate for you to go, Jule," she now said in a voice plainly touched by disappointment. "When am I to see you again?"

"To-morrow, of course. Can't you come and have luncheon?"

Ciceley shook her head. The girls gave simultaneous glances of hope, but Julia ignored them.

"Then I shall come out here," she decided crisply. "And Wick," she turned on the steps to send back a parting injunction, "be sure you come back in plenty of time to change. Remember we're dining out. The old friends in town have begun to discover us," she explained to the company at large. "We are going to the Beldens' this evening."

It was of these and of other old friends that she talked lightly during their progress toward the stirrup latch. Jim made no attempt at reply. His heart and his mind were too full of concerns nearer home. As he held the gate open, Julia, pausing an instant, looked back. Lucille had disappeared. Wick and the little one sat with their chairs very close. Ciceley alone was watching. At Julia's gay wave, she responded more temperately, then, wheeling about, entered the house. The stirrup latch clicked its farewell. Jim swung into step with his companion. Rover shot like a catapult between them, rushing forward as though to hurl himself over the edge of the world, only to spring in the air, come down facing them, and hurtle back, yelping his rapture. Jim growled out "fool!" at which rapture subsided. Still Julia did not speak.

Stealing an impatient glance down at her, Jim saw an expression that baffled him. There was something remote and withdrawn in its brooding serenity. Had he bent to her eyes, he might have seen deeper things, — the stirring of tender prophecies.

He kicked at a mushroom, ruthlessly crushing the pink-quilted miracle. Then came a suggestive cough, followed by loud raspings of an outraged throat.

"Well!" he broke out, at the end of restraint.

"Well?" she rejoined, and smiled up at him. Her dream faded slowly, leaving a long trail of star-dust.

"You've been there," he said. "You have seen. What do you make of the situation? Did Ciceley — Do you think now there's a chance to straighten things out?"

Julia reached through the fence, and broke off a twig of wax-myrtle. The lot where it grew was the one where her home, as a girl, had once stood. She looked at the small clustered berries, pellets of lead, they appeared, caked with white dust. She lifted the spray to her face, sniffing aromas.

"Do you happen to have a good surplus amount in the bank?" was the astounding question now shot at him.

Jim's loud ejaculation was, this time, spontaneous. "I don't understand."

"Few people do, when money is mentioned. To make it more clear, — how much are you willing to spend?"

"I can't see where spending comes in," he objected, gazing into her radiant face with a frown. Her words, to his honest, chivalrous soul, were both flippant, and strangely indelicate. "Ciceley's trouble goes deeper than money. If it didn't," he said, "she could have every nickel I've got. But she won't take it."

"Thanks! That's quite all I require. And you've got it?"

"Yes," growled the man. "Worse luck."

"Oh, you idiot!" laughed Julia. "As if there

was ever a situation where money couldn't help! Now brace yourself, friend. Are you willing — for Ciceley's sake, mind you! — to squander within the next few weeks, well, say fifteen hundred dollars?"

Jim did not flinch. "Twice that, and then some, if only I could know what you're driving at."

"Prepare for the stroke. Here it is. As you remarked, I have seen. Not only seen, but unsuspected, unless by that white witch, Lucille, I have weighed, probed, and measured for hours. I've got it all here." With the words she tapped lightly the line of white forehead shadowed by her jaunty hat. "Better still, I've a plan. It's a good one. It's bound to succeed, if you help. Can I count on you, Jim? Are you game?"

"I'm resigned," muttered Jim. "That's next best. Pull your trigger."

"You're to take Ciceley's girls for a little pleasure trip to New York."

"To New York! A pleasure tri — Me! With young females in tow! Holy smoke! To New York!" sputtered Jim, his eyes jutting glassily.

"You should start pretty soon," discoursed Julia. "There's no time to waste. Let's see. This is Tuesday. Thursday night would be fine. I'll make it my business to have the girls packed. Can you do it?"

"Thursday night! Jumping Jehosephat! Have you lost all your wits, Jule, or just having fun stringing me? Thursday night, and already it's Tuesday."

"If you'd realize, dear man, that you're not a defective record on a phonograph," Julia suggested mildly, "we'd make better headway."

"But the girls. Have they said they would go?"

"Not yet. I couldn't very well tell them until I was sure that they could. They'll know it tomorrow."

"Here, hold on a little," panted the man. "I've got to get breath. Do you realize —"

"I'm not wasting time on realizing," she struck in. "My part is more active. Is there any procedure connected with oranges why you can't leave?"

"No," answered Jim, after a brief, sharp struggle with mendacity. "There's nothing to do for 'em just now but watch 'em get ripe. I've got to be back for the crating, though," he added with hopefulness.

"And when does the crating begin?"

"About the third week in November."

"November," mused Julia. "And October is not more than half over. Good! That will give you a full three weeks in New York. Now please listen carefully. Thank heaven, I see a bench over there under a juniper. I'd like to sit down. Never mind whether or not I miss my car. When your mouth stays wide open, and your eyes roll like marbles, it gets on my nerves. Remember I'm not advocating murder, but happiness, — your happiness, Jim, as well as Ciceley's."

"I know you mean well, dear old Jule," he conceded, taking his place rather heavily beside her. "But how in the thunder is anybody's happiness going to be helped by my making a darned fool of myself, hiking off to a place where I don't want to go, and trailing two girls that probably won't want to come? Lucille is sore on me now."

"At the first hint of so glorious a trip, Lucille's reserve will melt into honey," Julia prophesied. "The little one, bless her! will have a few qualms about leaving her mother and, maybe — somebody else. But she'll follow Lucille," was added so quickly that any one not born a man would have noticed. "I tell you, Jim, they simply must go. It's not only for the good effect it will have on themselves and you." Here her listener moaned deeply. "But, for my own purposes I want them out of the way for awhile, definitely removed from Ciceley. This is fundamental for all our plans and hopes; and I can't for the life of me, figure out another way of accomplishing it."

"But what, in God's name, am I to do with myself and them, when we get to New York?" he intoned gloomily. His shoulders were now bent over. The big, shaggy head went down into his hands. His whole relaxed figure was so instinct with despondency that Julia's keen eyes softened.

"You sha'n't have a bit of the trouble of managing," she soothed, laying one hand on the great shoulder next her. "I've thought everything out. The details will be carried on by me personally through telegrams and letters. All you will need to do is to step on the New York express at our depot, and step off again when it stops. I shall see that a special taxicab is sent by a certain New York hotel to meet you. Even your suite of rooms will be already engaged. Besides, the girls won't be hanging to your coat-tails day and night. I shall write Jennie Brandt to call on them at once, and establish herself as

official chaperone. You remember Jennie, don't you, — Jennie Tarleton, that was?"

Jim nodded vaguely. He refused to be consoled.

"She married a Brandt of Virginia, connected with one of the big tobacco trusts. He is a multi-millionaire now, and has a ripping big house in New York, besides one at Tuxedo. They never had any children, and Jennie will be wild with delight at the chance of exploiting such girls. You see," she elaborated, "I've just visited her, and I know. She'll not only entertain them, drive them all over the State in her wonderful touring car, and see that they meet other young people, but I shall put her in special charge of their shopping."

The last word came with a meaning emphasis. Julia's eyes lighted with fun. But Jim, for all his response to her sally, might have been a large lump of clay.

"Of course they'll have any amount of shopping," she spurred deeper. "Richmond Hill fashions won't pass on the Avenue. That's where the first hole in your check book will start."

All she extorted by this was a gesture of scornful repudiation. Julia looked blank for an instant. Then her wits rallied. "You'll have quite a lot of buying for yourself, you know," she announced cheerily. "At least two new suits, neckties, shirts, and neither the shirts nor the ties with a touch of red." Jim swallowed, and dragged on his tie, which bore a resemblance to the strip of red flannel Aunt Nycie employed for sore throat.

"Smart shoes are a passion this season," she went on. Her glance traveled downward, at which Jim,

starting convulsively, withdrew his large feet with such swiftness that the bench was pitched forward, and very nearly sent them to earth.

Under this final and most bitter decree, the victim writhed silently. His eyes, seeking hers, were those of a suffering animal. Of all things distasteful to Jim, the purchase and wearing of new clothes were the worst.

Julia, to outward appearance, remained unrelenting. "Yes, at least three pairs of shoes," she pursued. "And all in the latest style. I'll write you names and addresses of both tailor and shoemaker. With your splendid shoulders, Jim, and your looks, it is nothing short of an outrage to humanity to go round all spotted and wrinkled like this. Just look at your waistcoat this minute!" Jim writhed like a worm stung by ants.

"You naïve, curious creatures called men," she went on, with light, scorn-touched lashes, "take for granted that women care nothing about your clothes. Well, they do, all of them, even when they don't know it. I want you to turn from a grub to a butterfly on this trip, Jim, and come back looking as unlike the elderly pucker of wretchedness you now are as I, in this Doucet creation, am unlike poor Sis, in her children's cast-off clothes. You will do it? You promise?"

The muttered assent was a clod, heaved up from black depths.

"Dear Jim," crooned her voice, "you'll be glad. It is all in the quest for your heart's desire. That is worth any trouble and effort, — now, isn't it?"

Jim sighed, but his face showed a lifting of gloom. "You're a wonderful planner," he said, after a little pause. "Have you considered yet what is to become of Ciceley with both of her girls away?"

"Have I!" she vaunted. "That's a pretty big slice of the whole. The very day you leave, Wick and I shall move out to Little Sunshine."

"Does Ciceley —" he began, then shut up his eyes. She caught the twinkle.

"Not yet. How could I say anything until I was sure of you?"

"And what kind of a hoodoo are you working out for Sis?"

! She made a small grimace. "None of your business," she parried. "My work is here — yours in New York. And I think," she threw in with bright malice, "that you'll find yours enough."

"Don't joke, Jule," he groaned. "It's not funny. It's hell!"

"Mossback!" she flouted. "You think that way now. But wait till you get in the midst of the white lights. Wait till that marvellous glitter and bubble of New York stirs in your blood! My only real fear," she avowed, "is that you won't come back when I need you."

Jim glared in disgust at the charge.

"But listen," she said to him quickly, "that was chaff. I know you'll come back. Now I have something exciting to tell you, — a piece of good news that I've saved to the last. Besides Jennie Tarleton and all she can do for the girls, you're to have an assistant, — a man, and a corker at that, — who

will be at the same hotel. It is some one you know."

"Do you mean it?" cried Jim. "A man — a real man — who will tag about with them, and sit at our table? If you're fooling me, Jule! — Is it sure?"

"Sure as that we're sitting on this rickety bench, and I hear my car starting down from the top of the Hill," answered Julia, springing to her feet.

Jim followed. "His name — for God's sake."

"Mark Stanwood."

"Mark Stanwood," cried Jim, a shadow of swift disappointment blotting the hope from his face. "That cub!"

"Not much cub left to him now," laughed the other. "He's well over thirty, and also six feet. He's an officer in a crack London regiment, and altogether one of the most eligible young men on this earth."

Jim was duly impressed. "Then will he, you think — can I count on him helping me out — hanging round? Won't he be off chasing girls?"

"Be off — with Lucille and that cluster of clove-pinks called Sylvia under Uncle Jim's wing!"

"I see," grinned the Uncle. "Lord, Jule, you have taken a ton of bricks off my chest! Here's the car. But I'm sorry. Can't you stay for the next?"

"No, those letters, the business one specially," she grimaced. From the platform she leaned down to him. "Come over to Little Sunshine at just about the same time to-morrow. And —" here she shook a dainty forefinger so close to his nose that he blinked,

"whatever else you do, don't dare to go near it till then."

"All right, Xantippe," he agreed. "I'll go hide in the swamp till that hour."

As the car sped, Rover, with invariable idiocy, started in frantic pursuit. Jim, as inevitably, hurled bloodthirsty adjectives, emphasized now and again by small stones.

Her last glimpse of them showed a repentant, panting canine, hanging his head by a tall figure, which to the watcher's loving eyes seemed, all at once, to have gained a new hope in its bearing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MOTHER AND SON

WICKFORD returned to the hotel barely in time for his change. Julia had been ready for quite ten minutes, and already had ordered a taxicab to stand in waiting, when Wick's signal on the door, three quick, successive taps, given this time, — or so it appeared to the listener, — with the effect of nervous energy, announced his arrival.

At her gay "entrez", he shot in. Her lifted eyes sparkled to see that, despite haste and tardiness, he had not forgotten her flowers. It was an established love-custom between them that in dining together it should be her son's flowers that she wore. No matter what others had been sent, or how much more suitable the lesser offerings might prove, those of her boy had the preference.

This evening, by happy instinct, he had brought a loose cluster of the white, waxen stephanotis, backed with small ferns. Nothing could more perfectly have harmonized with her gown of white chiffon, shading to cream, with a fold here and there of pale yellow green, the color of lily-of-the-valley foliage grown swiftly beneath glass. In her shining gray

hair she had dared a green butterfly, fashioned from velvet, with two long, quivering silver antennæ.

The boy's face, already more than a little flushed, deepened at sight of her. "Oh, I say, chum," he cried. "But you do look a stunner!"

Julia laughed happily, and, taking the flowers, passed into the next room to her dresser where, after a few tentative and unsatisfactory attempts at location, she began pinning them to the exact, needed place.

Wick followed, and lovingly watched every movement.

"Do you know, I rather fancy myself this particular evening," she said saucily, nodding toward him from the mirror. "My gown is quite sure to be the prettiest in the room; and it's even more certain that I shall be envied, by all, for my escort. What more could a mother desire?"

"You're the very best sort in the world, Mater mine," he assured her, between kisses. "Can you wonder I've never been able to fall in love with any one else?"

Through the long, somewhat over-set dinner, she frequently caught his bright eyes fixed on hers. His pride and delight in her shone there for all lookers to see. No Broadway electric sign, spinning its scintillant antics, was ever more patent.

With no effort, or even desire, to preëempt, Julia became, with the first course, the focus, the unchallenged center of interest. Her commonplace host grew vivacious. By the serving of salad, he became in his own eyes, a wit. Others leaned forward to

catch Julia's phrases. The whole table waited on her.

Even in London, where dining-out ranks as a fine art, Wick had been used to this gratifying process; but somehow, down here in the South, clustered about by old friends and associates, it took on a subtler triumph.

This look on her son's face Julia called, in her heart, her "reward", spelling the word with a very large capital "R."

During the short drive back to the hotel, neither spoke; though Julia sighed once in a sort of luxurious satisfaction; and the lips of both smiled. All the gay chatter just left, the glamor of compliments, the certainty of having created delightful impressions, lifted and passed out from them, like a luminous, inconsequent vapor. They grew more consciously silent. Each felt, through the mood of the other, a portent of things to be said.

Without question or statement, Wick followed his mother to her sitting room, closing the door softly as Julia snapped on the electric lights.

"I hope," she smiled, speaking at last, "that you're not tired or sleepy."

At his swift gesture of repudiation, she threw in, "For myself, I am fiendishly wide awake. I feel as if I never should sleep again. I want a long talk, — a regular powwow. I'm bursting for speech."

"Same here!" he declared, and at the spontaneous Americanism, Julia gave a pleased grin.

"Then tuck yourself somewhere away in a big, comfy chair, and light a cigarette, while I slip into

the next room, and lay aside my splendor. One really can't talk vital things to the clinking of hardware."

She went from him laughing, her two arms upheld in the act of unfastening the necklace so ignominiously described, and returned in a loose, clinging garment, more charming and *chic* than the evening gown just superseded. Great shadowy pink poppies appeared floating beneath a thin swirl of foam. A pink girdle bound it, and all about her throat the foam surged and fretted into a fairy-like spume of lace. All jewels were gone, except the plain, narrow wedding ring. The green butterfly, stuck in a pincushion, quivered alone. She looked young, almost girlish, in spite of the sheen on her gray-touched coiffure. Since the historic moment of burning her veil, Wick had never seen her except charmingly arrayed.

"Now this," she exclaimed, sinking into the big chair he drew up for her, "is what I call living! Yes, you can give me a cigarette." As she held up her face for the lighting, her eyes crinkled mischievously. "I'm getting a picture," she told him, as she gave out a long, happy puff, "of the faces of the Richmond Hill dames, when they first catch me smoking."

"Nonsense," said Wick. "I'll wager they all do it on the side. All women smoke. I've never met one yet who didn't."

"That was in England. You've much yet to learn of your native land. Down here it ranks with the breaking of biblical commandments. Your Cousin Ciceley, for instance. She would just as soon murder a baby as smoke. Poor, dear, little Sis."

At the mention of this name, the boy ceased to smile. "Mother," he questioned, speaking slowly and with evident earnestness, "what is it wrong with Mrs. Dering, — Cousin Ciceley, I mean? What is the matter with her?"

"With Sis?" parried Julia, pretending surprise. "How do you mean, 'what's the matter'?"

"Her looks — her — her — timidity. She isn't so old, not much older than you, I should say. And yet, see the difference! Somehow she gives the impression of the typical poor relation."

"And that is precisely what Ciceley has allowed herself to become. She's a mere household drudge, a bound, cringing slave to her daughters, and you see for yourself how much they appreciate it! She's a warning against the dry-rot of Victorian sentimentality. It is partly about Ciceley, and a plan I have thought out to revitalize her, that I am so eager to talk. But, first, before Ciceley, there's something —" She leaned toward him swiftly. Wick, true to his English schoolboy training, remained outwardly impassive, but she saw in his steady gray eyes the spark of a new, vivid interest.

"I want you to tell me," she said, "how you felt when you first saw Lucille."

The little flame died, though he answered her promptly. "What is there to think, except that she is an incredible, astounding beauty? I don't believe that a microscope would discover a flaw in Lucille, and yet, — all the same —"

"Yes, and yet — all the same?" led on Julia, with evident eagerness.

"There's something, — it's hard to describe. Something negative and withdrawn. She reminds a chap, somehow, of that girl in Tennyson, 'icily regular, splendidly null.' She is too complete for a girl, too assured of herself. When she is sitting or standing quite still, she appears to be — waiting."

"You are near being right," Julia nodded, and could not forbear a pleased smile at her son's keen analysis. "But Lucille is not null. Make no mistake there. She's alert and aware to each separate thread of gold on her head. As for waiting, I know what you mean, but I should say, rather, that Lucille abides."

"Trust you every time for the right word!" cried he, and then, twitching his shoulders as if in impatience of the topic, he demanded quite boldly, "And what of the other — the little one, Sylvia?"

"The little one, Sylvia." The echo was scarcely more than a breath. Without answer at once, she leaned back, and her eyes wandered past Wick, seeing again her dream. In the silence, she almost could hear the quickened beats of the boy's heart. "Little Sylvia," she smiled, "is a nosegay — a small, close-set nosegay of roses, wee, pink, ruffled roses. Perhaps there's a clove-pink slipped in. Wherever the little one moves, there should be the wings of small yellow butterflies. Within the first hour, Sylvia went deep into my heart."

And still she did not look at him. He gave a low sound, then swallowed hard. His hands, on the arm of the chair, had been moving. Now they clenched

sharply, and he sprang to his feet. He strode to a night-darkened window, sent the shade up, and stood near the frame, looking down.

Now Julia's eyes followed. They held an expression that mothers alone understand.

"Yes, both of those girls are undoubtedly beauties," she now lightly declared, catching back her usual tone of voice. "They're wonders to look at, of course, but nevertheless they need a good smacking."

Wick wheeled at the outrage. Calmly she lighted a new cigarette.

"You admitted to having noticed it, my dear," she recalled. "It's the way that they treat, or rather ignore, their mother. Any woman with a spark of spirit had much rather be beaten than ignored. I am sure that Ciceley would; only she has let things go on so far that now she doesn't know how to assert herself. As soon as you have sufficiently absorbed the landscape, Mr. Preston, I'd like you to stroll back here. That's right. Sit down. Fire up another 'ciggy.' I am now about to confide to that shrinking young ear, — on which, by the way, at this moment, a large, frost-bitten mosquito hangs, — a brief outline of my latest, proposed undertaking. At its magnitude, even I suffer qualms. If you, my poor child, live to the end of the story, I am sure you will agree that in all your fond mother's long and checkered career, this is the culm of audacity. To revivify a half-atrophied existence, — to lead a dull horse to the waters of life, and getting it there, make it drink, — to humble arrogant youth, and exalt down-trodden seniority! But there! I antici-

pate! Yes, you got the mosquito, and, thank heaven, did not smear him over your visage. All's right with the world! Now, attend!"

In crisp, lucid phrases she told him of Jim's long romance, of his recent despair, and his appeal to herself as an advocate. Humorously she sketched her conception of Ciceley's absurd and untenable attitude. "Her heart in the grave with her husband!" scoffed Julia. "Pooh! Rubbish! That early Victorian mush makes me ill! Think how unpleasant, if true. She'd need antiseptics. And her life's dedication to his children! Just a weak way of announcing her acceptance of all the negatives and none of the radium-thrilled positives! I blame Sis far more than the girls. All the same, I've decided to save her." As a climax to his part of her oration, she informed Wick of her advice to Jim, about taking the girls to New York.

Wick had been listening with most commendable attention. His bright face had showed all along not only keen comprehension, but unmistakable assent. Now, at the mention of New York, he cried, in quick protest, "Sylvia to be taken away!"

"Of course, goose! Lucille couldn't very well go without Sylvia. The fact is, they both must get out. I've lots to do here with their mother, and I simply can't stir with the handicap of their presence. I need a free field and no critics. Surely you must see this!"

Wick, nodding dejectedly, confessed that he did. "You don't think," he ventured, "that I had better go along too?"

"By no means! I need you too badly right here. There is plenty to busy us." She hurried on, giving him her idea of moving out to Little Sunshine. "Ciceley can't stay there alone, and besides, it is best for my plans to keep near her. We'll need a machine at this distance from town. Let's go out and look for one, first thing to-morrow. You remember," she said, as if to excuse the extravagance, "we had already decided to get a new model. The old Siddeley you sold in London fetched a good price, due to your cleverness. Of course," she flung in, while still the boy smiled at her tribute, "we'll arrange with Ciceley, first of all, that we are to put in our share of expenses." At the word "share", she gave him a most significant wink. "Think of the fun of speeding along that dear Old Shell Road, in and out from town! We must take Cousin Ciceley for long drives, and try to coax some color back into her poor little face. There'll be parcels to bring, — heaps of parcels! And, best of it all, we will make Ciceley fix the old place up as a welcome and a surprise to the returning travelers."

Wick struck at the bait like a trout. "That sounds bully. There's nothing more fascinating than getting a neglected place back into order. But, how about money? Cousin Ciceley doesn't seem to be very well off."

"Here's where our 'share of expenses' comes in."

"I ought to have known without asking," he laughed. "Mater, you are a peach! Jove, I long to begin this minute. The first thing will be to paint over those big, mildewed columns. Next, I should

say, cut the road-borders clean. A lot of the bricks at the edge of the flower-beds need straightening. They look like old teeth after a fight. I didn't realize before that I had noticed such details, but it seems that I did. Somehow, a line out of place has a weird way of jumping at me, hitting me right in the eyes."

Julia leaned back, and from sheer happiness began to laugh. It was all working out better than even her optimistic spirit had ventured to hope. She led him on tactfully, commending, suggesting, enhancing, — until to the vision of both, Little Sunshine arose recreated, its long vanished splendors restored.

"You get it from me straight enough," sighed the mother contentedly. "Your passion, I mean, for reclaiming things going to waste. Whether a home in decay, or a person, the æsthetic effect is the same. You remember what we made out of our cottage in Surrey? Well, there are great things to be done right here. But next," she declared, sitting upright, "by order of the court, we're to talk just of you."

The word came as sharp as a bullet. Wick's eyes opened wide. "Talk of me! We've been talking of me all along, — at least, in some part. I am in it, I fancy. There's nothing more special of me!"

"Oh, isn't there, though," she retorted. "Well, for one little thing —"

"Here, hold on there, Mater! Shift to second. You don't need more power, God knows. But I've got to slow down on this curve. I'm beginning to skid!"

"You're a nice sort of sport for a running mate," Julia derided. "If you really feel queer, here's my

foot on the brake, and the road ahead is as bare as a church aisle on Monday. It's your future, your material future, I want to discuss, — whether, by now, you have begun to feel anything like a preference for any special profession or business, or, more important still, in what locality you would care to practise it."

"Oh, that all!" exclaimed Wick, with a relish soon followed, to Julia's secret delight, by something resembling chagrin. "I thought — "

"Do you recall," she put in rather quickly, "that on the night of your twenty-first birthday we had a long heart-to-heart, something like this?"

"The idea of asking! You wanted me then, when I spoke of choosing some business, to wait until after this visit to the South. It was so unlike you to suggest postponing things, I was awfully puzzled. I couldn't quite get you —"

"And now that you're here, do you begin to understand?"

For an instant his eyes fell from hers; then meeting them bravely, he cried, "Hang it all, Mater. A chap might as well be made of glass!"

She smiled, but her face had grown wistful. "Wick, dear boy," she said earnestly, "don't you see it's because Roentgen rays are mere putty, compared with a love such as mine? But don't think that because of the insight I shall ever attempt to impose my beliefs or convictions on you. Your will is yourself. I gave you life, that is true, but sometimes I have shivered to realize all that it means. It's like loosing a bird from the hand, a soul from the

golden security of Nirvana. We mothers can love, we can help just a little, but the soul, when once freed, must work out its own strength and purpose. You know that in my eyes each individual is sacred. You can realize, with such a belief, what you mean to me, — you, my own son."

"Mother," he cried, with a break in the clear, boyish voice, "no girl has ever been, or ever can be to me, just what you are!"

"I know it," she answered, with a proud lifting of the head. "Perhaps better than you, my dear boy, do I know it. I wear it always, and consciously, as my diadem. No sweetheart, no wife, not even your children, can ever usurp just my place. But Wick, in a full, normal life, those niches should have their saints too. No mother worth being a mother can look to her only son's future, not wishing them filled.

"But we're getting at things rather fast, are we not?" she veered suddenly. "We haven't finished planning for now. We've been at home barely a day, and yet I can see that for you, as for me, the old influences quicken. We love England well, and surely shall go back there often. But each man must have some definite, certain nook on the old world's green surface, a place he calls his — he calls — home. Shall your nook be in England, a great Northern city, or — here?"

"Here, Mater! By all the Gods of the Greeks, right here!" shouted Wickford, and in excitement sprang to his feet.

Julia held tight to her chair, she longed so to follow.

"It's slow, our old South," she now tempted and

tested. "Only lately she has begun really to lose the paralysis of war. There is more money to make, many more opportunities for pleasure, up North."

"Darn the North. Why, this — this is already — home."

"And about your taking up business? You must realize, dear," she urged very softly, though her clutch was so tense that the knuckles had turned greenish-white, "that unless you are keen upon trying it, there's really no need. Your father left money. There are building lots — houses — right here. And besides, by good luck, my investments are all doing well. We are rich."

Wick stopped short of her chair. His gray eyes were flashing. "And a hell of a cad I would be," he cried angrily, "to be willing to hang on for life. That money is yours. I shall make my own living. I don't know quite yet how I'll do it, but there are plenty of ways. And what's more," he reiterated warmly, "my choice of a place is the South, where you and my father and I all belong."

At this Julia, abandoning pretence and restraint in a single ecstatic cry, rose to hurl herself bodily upon him.

"Oh, you dear boy — you one blessing! You incredible dear!" she sobbed out. "I thought that I loved you before, Wick, but now — Oh, I hardly can stand it!"

She searched about blindly for a pocket handkerchief, and finding none, slipped her fingers into Wick's left cuff for his.

The boy strained her close. "Why, Mater, what's

wrong? Are you crying? I never have seen you like this in my life! Have I said what I shouldn't? Have I hurt you, my dear, darling mother?"

"Oh, most precious of idiots!" answered she, in laughter and tears "You have said everything — done everything — with such heavenly perfection that I scarcely can hope it is true. No, I'm not crying, not now. The tears are just oozings of radium. Now let's sit down again, for I've found, or I think that I've found, the exact sort of work for you. Will you take mother in as a partner?"

"Will I just — you dear angel!"

"What we do out at Ciceley's will be a sort of beginning. I've had this in my mind all along. My plan is to buy up old places, — or even especially hideous new ones, — remodel, restore, and make each one beautiful. We will fashion a garden that will be an artistic extension of the architecture. Even the colors of flowers and of course the shrub-grouping will be part of a whole. Then we can rent or sell, and go on to others. I am sure we'll make money, and better even than that, we can lift the whole tone of our small sleepy home-town. Does it seem good in your eyes?"

The town clock struck two before Wick could be driven to bed. Not only a group of old homes, but long streets had been rebuilt and glorified. He went from her room a young conqueror, his battle of life already won.

"Pleasant dreams to the builder of beauty," she called after him softly. For awhile she sat on in her chair. She needed no sleep for her dreaming.

At last in her chamber she disrobed slowly, replacing each article with care. This punctilious neatness, which had not been part of her girlhood, had grown, through the necessities of travel, into a fixed and meticulous habit. She busied herself quite unthinking, her mind far away.

At the bedside she did not kneel, but drew herself upright more slenderly. Her head, with its trailing gray hair, went up slowly, and her shining eyes closed. "Dear God," she said, speaking aloud as one speaks to a beloved and familiar friend, "I thank You for life."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE PLANKS OF COLONEL JIM'S BRIDGE BURN, ONE AFTER ONE

JIM woke the next morning buoyant and tingling with an excitement not at first clearly realized. All of his dreams had been golden. Even the episode where he had believed himself Rover, pursuing eternally, with long, dripping tongue, a New York express train which eternally kept a scant three thunderous inches in front of his nose, did no more than awake him to laughter. Audibly he flung to this dream-dog, himself, a random assortment of epithets, usually kept for the orthodox canine.

This put-upon beast, sleeping on the floor near the foot of his master's bed, sprang to his feet, growling fiercely. It took a rough rub of his head and some reassuring speech to send him back partly, if not utterly convinced, that his Deity was sane.

With his next dream Jim literally entered Paradise. He walked in a Garden of Hesperides, but the fruit was of his own growing. Ciceley moved beside him. On her head was a small wreath of the blossoms. The smile that she lifted was that of a bride. This magic

dream-fragrance reached far out into waking. Jim dressed himself slowly, his very breath consciously restrained, lest the aroma should vanish. The trip to New York gained fresh meaning. Now, to his own great surprise, he was eager to start. As Julia had pointed out, it was all in the quest of his Heart's Desire and worth any trouble. It took a woman's intuition to see to the core of a sister-woman.

But even supposing that Ciceley should change, should show by her sweet, brown eyes that she could love him, he had pledged himself and her never again to suggest marriage.

At this blighting recollection, the dingy red necktie, which in his absent-mindedness he had taken up, jerked round his throat like the noose of a hangman.

Never, no, never, would he break that last solemn pledge. If he did, Sis would rightly despise him; not to mention his own self-disgust. Finding himself nearly strangled, he loosened his bonds with an oath. He glared at the magenta-colored face in the mirror, and told it savagely that the game was up even before it had started. "What possessed you to promise, you fool?" he burst out, shaking a fist at his glowering reflection. "Why, in God's name, did you mean it!" The incense of flowers vanished before sulphurous fumes. Even Rover was glad to escape.

Then the dark mood knew a sudden reaction. Well, he had asked Julia's help; he had promised to follow her lead. The gamble was on, and he would not be a quitter. "I'll doll myself up to the limit," he told himself bitterly, and with the words

gave out a low hiss, copied from some long-forgotten stage villain. "I'll stand by my ally; it's only the fair thing to her. I'll try to get Sis if I can; but I won't, not for her or Jehovah, deliberately eat any more dirt!"

With this he emerged from his door, crossed the huge, chilly hall, and strode into the dining room. Uncle Snow was just entering from the farther end, a large tray of breakfast precariously posed.

"Hurry up, there!" roared Jim. "I'm going to New York!"

Uncle Snow gave a cry. The tray lurched to windward, and by a swift act, as of legerdemain, was caught back from a crash. When finally the old man set it down before Jim, each dish and utensil chattering with a separate ague, he reproved, with solemnity, "Didn't you have no mo' sense dan dat, Marse Jim? To holler a scarifyin' statemint right out when you seen I wuz totin' yo' breakfus? Hit's de Lawd's mussy yo' coffee ain't leaking down thoo' de flo' dis minnit."

"Well, it isn't," retorted Jim, "so suppose you pour out a cup, and don't stand there enjoying St. Vitus dance all to yourself. Yes, I'm going to New York."

At each repetition of his amazing statement Jim had the bewildering sensation of having set fire to a fresh plank of his bridge. Water swirled dizzily beneath him. The fair, farther bank hung in mist. Only he felt that upon it grew fruit more golden than his, and white blossoms steeped in ambrosia.

Uncle Snow, by an effort, had recovered his jeopard-

ized calm. "Dis is too soon in de mawnin' fer projekin', Marse Jim," he remonstrated patiently. "You knows you ain't gwinter no New Yawk. Don't you see mor'n enuff of dem Yankee agints of yourn, right down here?"

"Oh, this isn't a business trip, it's for pleasure," said Jim, with a small grimace at the word. "I'm thinking of taking Miss Ciceley's two girls."

Snow's incredulity showed symptoms of breaking down. "What in de name of de Lawd does dey want to go to New Yawk fer?"

"Oh, partly," vouchsafed Jim, quite as if it had been a matter of course, "to get themselves clothes. I'm going to buy some too. All my suits have grown shabby."

But this was too much for belief. The old man grinned broadly, shaking his white head the while.

"Go on 'bout yo' bizness, Marse Jim! I knows you is foolin' me now. You wid new close, huh! Yo' close wuz bawn rusty. You likes 'em dat way. You'll be tellin' me next," he chuckled, "dat you gwinter buy Rover a new tail!"

"You can grin, you old Chessy Cat," said the other. "But it's true, just the same. We're starting this coming Friday night. I want you to look over my old trunks and valises, and see if I've got anything fit to take."

Old Snow scratched his head. His rolling eyes ceased their gyrations. He looked straight at his master, and then, all at once, a smile tinged with cunning and lit with a gleam, as of hope, spread his mouth.

"You means dat fact, Kunnel — 'bout buyin' new close? You means it, fo' Gawd?"

Jim glanced at the speaker in a little wonder. "Do you want me to take up a hammer and drive it in, you old mule?" he demanded. "Why in the devil do you look so pleased? I don't propose fitting you out."

"No, not wid new close," murmured Snow, with an air of concealed satisfaction. "I wuzn't er studyin' 'bout dem. But hit's come to my mind 'bout dat ole long-tailed black coat of yourn, what you never wears nohow. Fer dese menny years now," Snow confided, "I'se been hopin' to git mah'ied some day in dat coat."

"So that's where the grin starts!" laughed Jim. "Well, go get it now. I don't want to hold back your wedding. You can have the pants, too — and the vest," he shouted to vanishing heels, for the old man, after a single ecstatic gasp, had hurled himself into an angular Marathon. Before the beneficiary could return, Jim made his escape to the orange grove.

This giving away of his one Prince Albert loomed in his mind as another charred plank. He was being more and more definitely committed to the plunge, and less and less now did it daunt him.

He paced the long ribbons of sand between heavily-laden shrubs. Instead of his usual eager searching for prophetic gold spots on the fruit, he now paused in thoughtful consideration near the smallest and greenest of clusters.

"Not for a good four weeks yet, I should say," he remarked, fingering a spheroid of malachite.

After this brief, if reassuring survey, time came all at once to a maddening halt. The forenoon had apparently been nailed down to earth. Never had hours dragged so slowly. The case of his big hunting-watch acquired a new polish from the number of times it was withdrawn and impatiently returned to its pocket.

Luncheon found him taciturn, but Uncle Snow, faithfully serving, and jellied in personal bliss, could well afford temporary exclusion.

One o'clock finally arrived. In about half an hour Jim would dare to set forth. Recalling, with a start not entirely agreeable, Julia's comments of the day before on his garments, he pulled out a fold on his waistcoat and gazed at the spots.

"Snow," he called sharply, "come here!"

"Yassir," rose instantly from the pantry. Snow, a large ebony crab, scuttled into view.

"Bring me a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush."

"Yassir," said Snow again breathlessly. He wondered, in going, what new phase of delirium was on.

"I didn't ask you to wash my feet, did I?" roared Jim, as he executed an enforced and undignified jig to escape a great splash of water. "You'll be cleaning my teeth with it next. Here, if you can let up on the palsy long enough, scrape some of this muck off my vest."

The old man obeyed with alacrity. His expression, in working, was not unlike that of the schoolboy who makes a laborious copy. His woolly head canted to one side, his breathing came heavily.

Just as the reeling earth had begun to grow steady beneath him, a quick, imperious, "Snow, you old rascal!" caught him back to alarm.

He stopped the painstaking brush-strokes, and drew off to lift censuring eyes; but, perceiving where those of "Marse Jim" were now fixed, dropped the brush, and with a gurgle which might have been thankfulness at the chance of escaping that stare, fell to his knees, and began scrubbing the floor in wide, frantic semicircles.

"I don't seem to have any recollection," came the voice of the accuser terrifyingly restrained, from the still air above him, "of giving you that particular cravat." It was a scarf of dark blue, with small, inconspicuous white spots. Snow clutched at it wildly.

"You didn't, Marse Jim. Leastways — not eg-zacterly," he quavered. "I took hit myse'f. It was layin' on de flo' by y'o bureau. I thought you'd done thow'd it away."

"You lying, black scoundrel," cried Jim, striving hard not to laugh. "You know perfectly well if you helped yourself to all of my things you found 'layin' on de flo' ', I'd be going 'round naked. No, I don't want it now!" he exclaimed, seeing the old man begin a tremulous jerking. "Do you suppose I'd wear the thing after it's been round your horny old neck? You can hustle yourself to my room," he ordered. "Here, wait, take this bullfrog bait with you." With the words he began stripping from about his collar the streaked red necktie which yesterday Julia had scorned. "See if you can't find me another like

that of yours, under the bureau. If there isn't a blue one, get black."

At last he could start. What would he find waiting at Little Sunshine? He had not felt such excitement in years. At one instant he knew a keen hope that the girls would decline his, or rather, Julia's suggestion. At the next he was just a great boy promised a circus, and now suddenly smitten by terror that before he could get there the biggest elephant would die. He turned from the main-thoroughfare corner into the dark, shaded lane leading to Ciceley's. Eagerness quickened his stride. Rover, as usual, swung within a few inches of his heels.

Halfway down the green tunnel, two young figures, both laughing, swept in from an opposite street. They were evidently racing each other. He had been unperceived. He drew back to a thick juniper trunk, and in the same motion bent to stifle Rover's half-uttered bark into an outraged, low whining.

It was Sylvia, with Wickford in close pursuit.

From the time the two Dering girls could reach the old stirrup latch, and even before that desirable period, when the bars of the gate served as stepladder, they had delighted in playing the game, "Who'll get it first?"

For an hour or more these two, at Julia's behest, had been strolling. "Wick was dying to see," or, at least, so his smiling mother averred, "the old haunts of his childhood." The little one very demurely accepted the office of guide. All along she had been as conscious of "company manners" as though they had been a pair of squeaking new shoes.

She answered Wick's questions sedately, but often, when his look was turned elsewhere, fastened her brown eyes on him. The boy's somewhat exotic courtesy, and, still more, the queer English accent which kept her eternally on guard not to laugh, wrought an effect of restraint.

She liked Wick, of course. He was "nice." She had never met any one like him. There was no one with eyes just like his. Their bright look, as he met hers, — and this she avoided as often as possible, — made something inside her breast quiver and shrink. When at last he consented to turn their steps homeward, she was conscious of definite relief.

At first sight of her gate through the trees, the strange feeling of respite flared to excitement. "Oh, there is the gate," she cried out. "I bet I can reach the stirrup latch first!"

She whirled from his side like a leaf in a storm. It took Wick one moment to realize the challenge and very few more to speed past her. He hung to the gate, his hand curved, triumphantly over the old iron boss.

"You are mean," panted she, crimson-cheeked, pouting, and dimpled. "You let go. It's my latch!" Vainly the small fingers prodded. "Ouch! Now you have hurt me," she wailed.

Wick abandoned his clutch. Instead, he bent down to her hands, catching and holding them. They were tender and soft as the young leaves of spring. "I don't see a bruise. Where's the hurt?" he asked anxiously. "I wouldn't have hurt you for worlds!"

For answer she caught them away, slid through the

gate, and, sending back showers of elfin-like laughter, ran across the lawn and into the house.

Jim, smiling but looking quite thoughtful, emerged from behind the thick tree. Was this part of Julia's plan, too? Nothing she did would surprise him. He shook his head in a mute, if profound, recognition of that marvellous woman's abilities.

Rover, now free, galloped furiously away. He didn't intend risking another such grip on his nozzle. Not even at the gate would he trust Jim's discretion, but, writhing beneath the lowest bar, made his way in. At his loud bark of triumph, Jim glanced apprehensively toward the house. Of course, when they heard the fool barking, they would know he had come. They would all be upon him now. Escape was cut off.

He groaned, and his knees turned to sand.

But the long verandah remained empty. "Hello!" whistled Jim to himself. "What does this mean? Surely they haven't all left without giving me warning!" Sylvia and the boy Wickford were, to his plans, of no more concern than a pair of gay humming-birds.

From an upper-storey window a bright golden head, that of Lucille, was suddenly thrust forth, and as quickly withdrawn. He felt, rather than heard, her swift feet on the stairway.

"Jumping Jehosephat!" he groaned, "Have I got to get her first, and all by myself!"

Yes, here she came shining toward him, an arrow aimed straight, its shaft glinting sunlight. "Oh, Uncle Jim. Dear Uncle Jim," she was crying. "Of all blessed angels!"

So he was the cause of this radiance! Curses, all deep muttered curses on Julia, and all meddlesome women of her kind. He braced himself doggedly for the attack, and essayed a pleased smile, but the effort, had Julia been there to observe it, was strangely like that of the martyr, St. Sebastian, when turned to a quivering pincushion.

"Crash!" was Jim's conscious, if smothered imprecation, as the girl's strong young arms tightened about him. "There goes the last plank of my bridge!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PREPARATIONS; AND THE WRITING OF TWO LETTERS

"ALL right. That's all right, Lucille," sputtered the agonized recipient of her raptures. "So you and the little one do want to go!" He fought his way past, detaching her lovely arms as though they had been octopus tentacles. "Where's your mother and Jule?"

"We've all been up-stairs, looking over old trunks to see if any of them would do to take," answered she, now a few steps in the rear. She smiled with a slight touch of malice to notice that even the back of his neck quivered and burned with discomfiture. "They'll be down before long. I told them I wanted to be the first to thank you. How did you ever happen to think of such a glorious, wonderful thing, Uncle Jim?"

In terror at the new note of gratitude, the Colonel plunged forward. His eyes, fixed on the still distant door, cried for help. Dignity alone kept him from breaking into a run. Then he froze for a second time to a pillar of salt. The little one had heard, and was coming. "Uncle Jim! Uncle Jim!" she cried out. "Are you really going to take us to New York? I

just can't believe it. It sounds like one of my fairy stories."

He bent, with a groan, to her kisses. Would Julia, the treacherous, the unfeeling, never come to his aid?

Yes, there she was now, moving slowly and with as much smiling assurance as if her pledged ally were not being pulled on a rack. Beside her, though rather less genial, strolled Wick. At some little distance behind both, he could see the downbent head of Ciceley. Julia turned about now, and was speaking in a low, yet emphatic voice to her cousin. Apparently no answer was given.

Jim strode through the group, straight to her of the downcast demeanor. She shrank, as if pleading, and then slowly lifted a face stained with tears.

"Why, Sis, you've been crying!"

She tried to release a wan smile, but instead cowered back, and burst into sobbing.

"Look here," Jim declared, swinging a sword glance of defiance about him, and then planting himself before Ciceley in the posture presumed to be that of the Rhodian Colossus. "Not one step do I budge if Ciceley don't want it! Get that?"

"Of course Ciceley wants it," threw in Julia hurriedly. "She's ecstatic at the thought of her girls having such a wonderful trip. It is only natural that, just at the first —"

Jim cut her short rudely. "I'm waiting to hear, Sis, from you."

Into the silence crept Sylvia. "I don't want to go, either, Uncle Jim, if mother takes it so hard." One

arm went around the lax figure, but her shy, shining eyes were for Wick.

Lucille gave a sound of impatience, and opened her lips to speak. At a swift, warning gesture from Julia, she shut them to lines of stiff wax.

"I don't call it fair to the girls," spoke up Julia, ignoring her recent rebuff, "to force a decision that means so much to them both while Ciceley is not quite herself."

"Don't notice 'em, Sis. Don't you hear 'em. Just tell Jim you want 'em to stay, and they — stay!" Again he glared fury.

"You know I don't m-m-mean to be selfish," wept Ciceley. "I only live for my children."

A low "tschk" of scorn from Lucille made her start. "I realize what a great chance it is for them. It was kind of you, Jim, very kind to propose it. I don't want to stand in the way of such a great treat. But they've n-n-never been away from their mother a whole single night in all of their l-l-lives!" The final word rose in a crescendo of woe.

Lucille threw back her head and walked off. The frozen disgust in her eyes caught more than a gleam of response in Julia's. Little Sylvia stood still near her mother. Her hands, loosely clasped, hung in front of her. Her long lashes brushed her pink cheeks.

"Then it's settled!" cried Jim, in a tone which he strove to make hearty. "No trip. We'll be happy right here!"

But at this, Ciceley, smitten with terror, flew to him as a bird flies defending her nest. "No, no! I don't want you to say that! They're to go, do you

hear? They're to go! I've already agreed. It is lovely of you, Jim, to take them. You can't back out now. If you did —"

She threw a frightened look at Lucille, who, turning again, had stood still, and was watching with cruel intentness. "Oh, Jim! Please don't disappoint them now!"

"But, Sis," stammered the bewildered man, "do you know what you're saying? You're shaking and shivering now as if you had chills. If this is to be a new species of martyrdom, and I am the cause, I cry quits. You have enough to put up with already!"

His eyes, sapphire-blue now with menace, went first to Lucille, who, in meeting them, looked down demurely; and then flashed, with more meaning, to Julia. Ciceley's reiterated protests vanished in air.

"As I told you before," remarked Julia, "and was snubbed for my pains — this is no time for forcing a statement. We all know the girls are to go. And now, if you can stop glaring at me long enough, suppose you come out and take a look at our new car?"

She wheeled with the air of a victor, and went down the steps. At the far corner of the house, half hidden from view by overgrown shrubs, stood a car, almost startingly new. Every wind-stirred leaf gleamed in it: even the clouds far above moved in its black lacquered surface.

"We are going to town in a little while," Julia informed him. "That is, Wickford and I are to take the girls in. I have some things at the hotel I am to lend them for the trip. Ciceley refuses to go. She is nervous, she tells me, about riding in motors.

You had better stay here and keep her company. We will be back again in less than two hours."

On the drive Lucille sat on the rear seat with Julia.

"Haven't you thought," asked the girl, in a tone pitched too low for the others to hear, "that it may be dangerous — this leaving Uncle Jim alone with mother?"

"You mean — she may yet influence him to give up the trip?"

Lucille nodded. Her face, in the strong afternoon light, was as flawless and pure as the petal of a just-opened magnolia flower.

"No," answered the elder woman, after a moment of consideration. "Of course, I had not ignored the possibility; but I don't think it really a risk. If I had, I should never have left them."

Lucille leaned back softly. From her lips came a sigh of relief. "I am sure that you know, Cousin Julia."

At this the Commended One, looking swiftly away to hide her intelligent smile, knew that much had been given.

She began now to chatter irrelevantly, pointing out things near the road, but soon a distrust of the girl's concentration came over her. It was intensified by the perception that Lucille never looked where the oratrix pointed, nor made the slightest effort at response. "Now she's 'abiding,'" thought Julia. "It won't do to let this run on. I'm not ready for it."

Throwing herself back into the one topic Lucille had broached, she said, as if lightly continuing a theme never abandoned:

"Yes, I am quite sure there's no risk. For one thing, Jim wants to go now. I am not at all certain he knows it, but his mind's set on going. Then Ciceley — your mother — is very intuitive. Oh," she flung in, as Lucille gave an incredulous start, "I presume you don't think so. Neither of you girls has the slightest conception of the real person you have fallen into the habit of calling 'mother', but she has intuition, and much else besides. As soon as she sees how Jim feels, she'll adapt her ideas to his. That's Ciceley's way."

"She's never adapted herself enough to marry him," stated Lucille.

Julia was for a moment, as Wick would have said, "knocked off her pins."

"Oh, well," she cried, laughing, "you'll admit that an adventure like marriage scarcely comes under the term 'adaptation.' I'd call it absorption, or even, in an extreme case, annihilation."

Lucille did not join in the merriment. For an answer she shifted her pose, so that, instead of her exquisite profile, her whole thoughtful countenance was set towards her companion.

Julia stirred, with an amused, if irritated consciousness of intrigue. It was not part of her design to submit to questioning thus early in the game. She marvelled at the country girl's temerity in daring it.

Lucille's eyes, clear, steady, and appraising, moved over her cousin's face with the touch of cold fingertips, and came back to the now-guarded eyes.

"I wonder," she mused reflectively, "how it has

happened that you never married again, Cousin Julia?"

Julia gave a light gesture of dismissal. "Some people," she fenced, "have a deep-rooted prejudice against second marriages."

"Not people with your intelligence," retorted Lucille. "I am sure that you get — that you take — what you want. It's the only sensible way. There's something you are after right now, though of course I cannot guess it yet. But this trip to New York — " She paused, and in her face Julia saw a gleam as of malice. "This trip so generously offered us by Uncle Jim — " here she threw in the fragment of a laugh, — "it would never have entered his head from now until Doomsday. You are doing it all."

"Help! Help!" uttered Julia in affected alarm. She leaned forward, sending her voice straight to the ears of the murmuring pair on the front seat. They turned simultaneously; Wick for an instant only, as he needed his attention for the wheel, but Sylvia in wide-eyed arrested surprise.

"I'm being dissected," cried Julia to her. "I thought I had just a nice girl in the car here beside me, and now she has changed to a Sibyl, a mind reader. I fear for my reason. What do you-all do with her, Sylvia, when these attacks come on?"

"Nobody ever tries to do anything with Lucille," confided the little one, dimpling. "All of us let her alone."

"But how can I let her alone when she's chained by my side? Thank heaven, here's town. Lucille, you appalling young person, use your X-rays for the

shop windows, and keep them well turned from Cousin Julia, or I will not answer for consequences."

Lucille submitted with smiling complacency. That she relished the effect just produced was quite evident. Julia, vibrating beside her, had the uncomfortable emotions of a much-ruffled hen, whose feathers refused to stay down.

In the hotel, before opening of trunks and the disclosure of one after another of Julia's marvellous possessions, Lucille cast off subtleties, and became equally with Sylvia a wondering, exclamatory young girl. She realized that the clothes she had longed for, and dreamed of, were like these. None of her fashion books showed them. Something hidden and fine in her whispered that they were not mere fashionable garments, but that each was an artist's creation.

To the question in her bright, uplifted eyes, Julia answered, "Yes, they are lovely. I know it. I was pupil to one of the greatest of modern French artists, just to learn from him how to design and wear clothes. He believes woman's dressing to be a legitimate part of Fine Art. That is why I nearly always appear better-looking than I really am," she explained frankly. "I haven't a decent physical point that isn't enhanced, nor an indecent one that isn't consciously remedied."

"It is wonderful — wonderful!" murmured Lucille, and from her enraptured expression one of her listeners, at least, knew she was thinking, "If my good points could be enhanced!"

"Of course," went on Julia, as she flung a confection of mauve and pale green to the bed, "such training

brings penalties. It is torture to me to see women in blasphemous gowns. It's a crime against beauty. And so few women know. It has got to be a sort of passion with me," she confessed, her eyes sparkling, "to mentally undress and reclothe all the women I'm thrown with."

"Have you ever done it to me and Lucille?" demanded the little one, with such charming naïveté that Julia laughed out, and even Lucille flashed an appreciative smile.

"Dress you, you small kitten! Well, rather! You and Lucille both. I am going to write a twenty-page letter to New York this very evening, and all about clothes for you two. Just wait till you get there! Just wait—" here she paused, as one holds a gay toy out of reach of a child, "till you come back to dazzle the town!"

"Oh, oh!" gurgled Sylvia, for happiness. "But what about mother?"

"Oh, mother," said Julia, deliberately misunderstanding, "Wickford and I are going to be so nice to her she won't have time to grieve."

"I didn't mean grieving," persisted the little one. "Are you going to try to do anything about *mother's* clothes?"

Julia's swift side-glance toward Lucille caught the expected sneer.

"I'm afraid," she said gently, with a note of regret, "it's almost too late to help mother. Besides, as you know, it will make her much happier if I concentrate all my talents on you girls."

Lucille made no comment, but her look showed

relief. Seeing it, Julia stiffened, and said something under her breath.

Their return to Little Sunshine found the abandoned ones sitting in Darby and Joan contentment in the late sunlight, near the top of the verandah steps.

While Ciceley went up-stairs with her daughters to marvel and thrill over the treasures that 'Cousin Jule had lent them', Julia, motioning Wick out of ear shot, leaned closer to Jim.

"Is Ciceley quite all right?"

"All right!" echoed Jim, with what seemed to his listener deliberate stupidity.

"Yes, goose. All right about letting the girls take the trip?"

"Why, of course," he now answered, as if pained and astonished that she thought questioning necessary. "You don't know Sis if you think she'd let her own feelings hold back her girls from their fun. She only lives for her children."

Julia gritted her teeth, and with the sound inwardly erased one of the black marks against Lucille. Jim could be sometimes maddeningly dense!

She sprang to her feet. "Come on, Wick," she cried out. "Let's go look at the stable, and see what it needs to be turned into an up-to-date garage."

After the pleasant, light supper, to which Jim had been persuaded to remain, Julia announced, in arising, that she must go back to town almost at once.

"Yes, letters again," she explained airily, and this time gave a wink at Lucille. "Long letters, and all most important. I'll declare," she averred in pretended despair, "I am sure that some day I shall

turn to a typing-machine. Do I use one!" she flung back to Ciceley's somewhat startled query. "Why, I play on the sheets in my sleep! I carry a typewriter round with me. It's a lamb of a folding one, not much bigger than a jewelry case. I'd as soon start a journey minus a toothbrush!"

The young people, more specially Sylvia and Wick, now gave vocal protest against having their evening cut short.

"I'll tell you what, girls!" cried She of the Hundred Resources, "you run up-stairs and fetch some warm coats, and any old rug you can find, and drive in with Wick and me. He will bring you out again. I don't want him round when I'm writing. Keep him out here as long as you can stand it. But," here the stern note arrested young figures already poised for running, "let it be understood here and now that my feeble intellect is not a stray bone for any one's picking! Do you hear, you white witch?"

"I hear," laughed Lucille, "and I promise."

All events having taken place according to the strategist's planning, eight o'clock found her alone in her hotel apartment, orders given at the desk that no caller or telephone rings should disturb her, the typewriter opened and ready, and on her white forehead a frown, hinting of measured thought.

With a sudden, decisive gesture she stuck in the paper, and began. The keys swung into a merry clog-dance. This letter evidently held no pitfalls, no problems. Frequently the writer smiled. Once she laughed out. When finished, she slipped it into an envelope addressed to "Mrs. George Brandt."

"Jennie's going to be pleased to the bone," said the writer aloud. "I wish I could go, if only to see her face when she first catches sight of Lucille."

Two very short missives came next. One was to the proprietor and manager of the hotel where Jim was to stop, the other to a New York dressmaker whose name conveyed meaning, even along the Parisian Rue de la Paix.

With the fourth, the nerve-core of the complex was touched. She adjusted the paper, wrote out the full date, and then started, "My very dear Mark." Then she stopped. The famous rogation of Stevenson, "Only show me, dear Lord, the things to leave out. I can manage the things to put in," came to her.

She rose and went over to a window. It is instinctive in those who have a room-pent perplexity to seek the appearance of space. She looked out, perceiving nothing.

To give others advice — honest sympathy — her best counsel — these were old stories to Julia, but never before, as it seemed now to her, had she dared to play puppet with souls.

For a long while she stood in deep thought. "The thing's begun now," finally she muttered. "If you're crossing a Rubicon, especially with others in tow, you've got to keep on."

And, still slowly, but with an increase of determination at each nearing step, she went back to her "lamb of a typewriter."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE MELTING OF THE ICE-MAIDEN

LUCILLE DERING stood, one early November morning, at the window of a certain New York hotel. Out before her Central Park led off into luminous hillocks of mist, whether tree or rounded earth, she could not determine, for all swam alike in a shimmering autumn-tinted mist. Directly beneath her ran the great, bared artery of life called Fifth Avenue.

In New York, the month of November holds to no medium grade. Either it is a detestable welter of mud, cold, and rain, or else, as now, a thing of surpassing loveliness. Not even in her far Southern home had Lucille seen sunshine more golden; but the air of New York, unlike that of her wrapt, tranquil Hill, was alive with myriad small bubbles of energy. She had read in novels of the "vital and inspiring atmosphere" of the great city. Now she was breathing it in, stirring and thrilling to its influence, was tantalized, urged, — almost, she felt, in a subtle, mysterious way, being re-created.

For the girl at the window this morning seemed to conserve but a vague, distant kinship in spirit to the self-assured, smiling young creature who, only a few

weeks ago, had been immanent in this same fair flesh. The change had commenced at her hand-clasp with Mark Stanwood, and the swift look of wonder and joy in his eyes. At first she had thought it merely a component part of excitement, the exhilaration of being at last in New York, of buying new clothes, meeting charming new people, and, most of all, of being for a time freed from the dullness of home.

There was scant time to give to her reveries. Jennie Brandt, as a chaperone and instigator of "parties," had been all that Julia predicted, and more. Each day was packed close with adventures which ran over the edges far into the night.

Jim, boyishly immune from the urge of such introspection, declared buoyantly that he was having "the time of his life." Little Sylvia was equally objective; while the fourth of the party, Mark Stanwood, as courteous and perfect in manner as only a well-born Londoner can be, showered equal attentions on all. His advice to Jim, at the tailor's, was invaluable. Mrs. Brandt, whose one fear in life was of getting too stout, announced herself promptly Mark's victim. "I can go back to butter and sweets again, now," she said plaintively, and yet with a leaven of hope. "I have heard there is nothing so infallible for making one thin as an unrequited passion. And what chance have I got?" she demanded, in humorous despair, "with a husband who loves me at home, and two rivals like these," sending glances of scathing at both girls, "under Mark's nose from morning till midnight?"

Within a few days she began to show interest in

which one of her rivals would win. "Surely one of you must," she insisted. "Mark's too frightfully good-looking and clever to send back to England alone. If it wasn't for George —!"

Her tone, always chaffing, always bright with goodwill and impartial attachment to her fair "borrowed" daughters, began, for some reason, to stir secret pangs in Lucille.

"Is Cousin Julia behind this, too?" she wondered uneasily. "But what part of her plan could it serve?" There were moments when Mrs. Brandt's smile held an edge.

And Mark — after that first keen, incredulous flash of delight — had displayed in her presence no more self-consciousness than Jim. Flowers came to both girls, matched, it would seem, bud by bud. The boxes of candy were sent to the "Misses Dering."

Lucille found herself watching with breathless intensity for some hint of preference, a longer clasp of the hand as he assisted them in turn from a taxi; a more lingering touch to the evening wrap which he folded about her young shoulders. Even at times she attempted, — and, with a quiver of scorn, self-acknowledged the effort, — to compel an unveiling of choice. But Mark, as if warned, kept a debonnaire balance between them; and each day Lucille knew deeper thorns.

Recently the desire for a few hours of solitude had grown to a physical need. She must be alone with these new, acid thoughts. She must face them, adjust herself to them, win her way through the forest of doubts. But complete isolation was not easily

compassed. At last, in despair, she fell back on the immemorial feminine plea of sick headache.

A trip for that day had been planned, the party to leave about nine o'clock. There was luncheon to be taken at Tuxedo, and afterward a circuitous motor-drive home along a justly famed country road.

About eight, the girl summoned the little one, and to her, with moans, lied convincingly. Sylvia, instantly solicitous, wished to remain, but the sufferer, acquiring a martyr-like tone not unlike that of her mother, said that all she needed was quiet and rest. A morning alone in her room and some bromide would make her, as Mark said, "quite fit" by the time that the others returned.

She lay on the bed tense and watchful through closed lids, to see that her plans did not stray. At last came the telephone announcing, "Mrs. Brandt waited."

Lucille gave a long sigh of relief, followed quickly by the sharp cry, "Oh, don't let her come up here, Sylvia. She's a dear, and I love her, of course. But sometimes she's dreadfully vivid! I'll go mad if you bring her up now."

As the door closed on Sylvia, the figure, a moment before prone in anguish, sprang up, and flinging about its shoulders a dressing-robe, rushed toward the window. She could see by a down-tilting glance from one side the edge of the pavement that bordered the hotel's main entrance.

In front of it, blocking all others, stood the Brandts' enormous green car. The chauffeur and liveried footman, dressed to match, held dummy-like postures in front. In the rear, a mass of bright colored veils

and potential energies, waited impatiently the hostess. Now she threw out a gay hand of welcome. The footman sprang down as though she possessed him on wires. Little Sylvia was tripping toward them.

Close behind little Sylvia came Mark. "When he moves," thought the watcher, "all the other men seem stiff and common." In his hands the Honorable Mark bore two clusters of roses. The first, a deep crimson, was lifted towards Mrs. Brandt. The second, of delicate pink, he now offered, with a bow of exaggerated homage, to Sylvia. Swift phrases of merriment flew between. The long-lashed, dark eyes of the girl dwelt on his. Her face, now all smiles and shy dimples, outmatched her roses in hue. Mark also was laughing. His teeth shone white as he helped her small figure into the car. Mrs. Brandt beamed on both, well pleased. Lucille, without knowing it, took a sharp breath.

What if, already, it was Sylvia he cared for? Sylvia was only a child, but it was no strange happening for a man of mature years to love such a child. There was middle-aged Mr. Barnes on the Hill. It had naturally made him a laughing stock, and no one had laughed quite so long or so heartlessly as Sylvia. Yet the fact still remained that the idiot had fallen in love, as he called it, with Sylvia. Then too there was Wick, and some others. From the first Wick had been devotee. His mother had seen and approved it; and Sylvia, at least there in the South, had appeared not only flattered, but gracious.

This reflection, however, brought nothing to assuage. She had little confidence in Sylvia's sincerity. All

Southern girls of that type were born flirts. Lucille's lips curled at the thought. Whatever her faults, this tawdry and sometimes most cruel indulgence of cheap personal vanity was not one of them.

"Besides," she reasoned, and through the swift current of thoughts not a turn of the hand in the still-waiting car went unnoticed, "Wickford is almost as much of a child as Sylvia. What hope of success could a boy, or indeed any other man have, should Mark Stanwood happen to care?"

Jim at last entered the car. Mrs. Brandt evidently chaffed him for tardiness. Smartly tailored, now perfectly hatted and shod, Colonel Jim might have passed for an up-to-date Metropolitan clubman.

Lucille smiled, but the smile was not pleasant to see. Here was one phase of Julia's strategy which from the first had been patent. Jim, in sudden despair at his last rejection, had confided his sorrows to Julia. She was trying to help him to win. So tame an affair could not hold the girl's interest long. Whether Jim gained his long-sought-for desire, or whether he knew final defeat, the life at the Hill would proceed just the same. He and his "Sis" would jog on, side by side, to their elderly graves. It all seemed dull, tepid, almost a farce.

Now the car blew its siren for starting. Lucille pressed her face to the pane. Mark suddenly turned his head as if to look up, at which, with a gasp, she recoiled. Had he seen her? And if so, would he guess why she needed to stay there alone? For an instant she shut her eyes close.

When she dared look again, the great car was gliding

away, smooth and silent as a slender canoe in deep waters. She strained her vision until it faded into golden mists, then, returning to the center of the room, lifted slowly her long white arms. Here, at last, was her boon of a day which no one need share. There was much to deliberate. She must think, plan, determine, adapt. If, as her instinct assured her, this Machiavellian scheme had dared to include arbitrarily her own vital tissues of character, using her soul, as it were, for a thumb tack to hold down the edges of a chart, — this day's ponderings were to free her. That jeopardized being, the Lucille she believed herself, a creature wrought slowly and consciously through years to be strong, self-sufficing, secure, — she must arise purged and strengthened from the crux of this day's fearless percipience. "If only," and here the golden head went down, "her falling in love with Mark Stanwood had not been foreseen!" This indeed would be the final degradation.

A knock came at the door. Her pulse quickened with a premonition of what it might mean. Again, in a vision, she saw Mark with his cluster of roses leaning above little Sylvia. He had never yet given flowers to one and neglected the other.

She sped to the door. Yes, there was the bell boy, and in his arms a long florist's box. She received it composedly, and bidding the messenger wait, gave him money. Now, locking the door, after sending down word to the office that on no account was she to be disturbed, she went over to a table, and, with a clumsiness born of unsteadied nerves, began to untie the gold cords.

Inside the box lay a sheaf of white roses, — long, perfect buds, each worth a separate scrutiny. She pushed them aside quite unseeing, in her quest for a hidden card. She found it at last, in its small, sealed envelope, a visiting card, with Mark's name. The trembling of fingers disclosed, on the other side, a few lines written in pencil. At this, all her breath seemed to stop. It was what she had hoped. This had been Mark's first chance of addressing her solely.

Some queer, unfamiliar influence held her back from immediate reading. It might mean so much — and — so little! She sank to a chair, and, after a few moments, with a word of impatience at her schoolgirl folly, deliberately raised it, and read:

"Sorry! Not only for the victim but for ourselves. With regrets, and hoping that by evening you will be quite all right, M. S."

Her lips had been drawing to a hard, whitish line. She read once again, and then, with a sound that travestied laughter, flung the card wide. It skimmed through the air in a circle; fluttered an instant in poise and fell into her lap. Now she crushed the frail thing into angles so sharp that they hurt her soft palm. She was glad of the pain.

Mark's words might have been written to Sylvia, — for the matter of that, to Colonel Jim. There was not even a waver of sympathy in the firm, pencilled lines.

She crept back to her bed. She had heard somewhere that one could think more clearly when lying down. Here the fictitious headache, as if lying in wait, clutched her temples. And, after all, what was

there to think? Her task, more objective, more devastating, was merely to face what had happened. She had entered the lists of reality, decked and visored, to find that her armor was glass. She, Lucille the fastidious, the unapproachable, the self-assured, had fallen in love like a gum-chewing shopgirl with some Prince of the "Movies"; and that with a man who had not sought her love. She had even put forth conscious effort to win him. The shame of this fact scorched her brain. No, she would not admit that she loved him! She was not of the sort who goes mad. It was only that somehow, from that first, breathless instant of meeting, he had seemed to be part of her dreams. There were doubtless a score of other men quite as attractive. If this one were foolish enough to prefer an infant like Sylvia, it proved him no true mate for her.

At this she sat up, the throbbing head lifted, and summoned her "unconquerable soul." Then, under the proudly drooped eyelids, stole the image of Sylvia looking up into Mark's face. It had held at the moment a heart-catching resemblance to the mother — to Ciceley as she must once have been. "He is cursed with fidelity, poor man! It is only to see his old love that he's on his way to America now." The memory of Julia's words worked like the point of a blade. Perhaps here, just here, lay the quivering core of Mark's secret. In Sylvia he found his first love renewed. If this were the case, she, Lucille, was indeed irremediably desolate. No mortal could strive against phantoms.

"Well," she said aloud bitterly, clutching at pride,

"I wanted to find out a reason. This absurdity explains every point. The thing for me now is to accept it, and fling off my own silly frenzy."

For a few moments longer she fenced. She would still be herself, would repel this degrading encroachment. Then, in the next moment, with a cry as the walls of her House of Life seemed to fall, she threw herself back to the pillows, and gave herself over to the tempest. Not since childhood had she known such tears. Her whole slender frame rocked and writhed in its yielding to passion. She felt it a strange, untried luxury, and literally revelled in grief.

"It is true!" she sobbed out in an ecstasy of abasement. "I do love you, Mark. I can never love any one else. I shall go to my grave an old maid!"

Like Mark, she knew herself cursed with fidelity; but agonizingly unlike, no waiting could bring her reward. Later on, finding that the paroxysms had a tendency to lessen, she began goading and lashing her imagination with pictures of tragedy in which she played the chief part. Now she had entered a convent. Her vow had been taken until death. She saw her sad face, white as its austere setting, and a new gush of tears brought relief.

Next, she decided to go in for trained nursing, connected perhaps with some Settlement work. In her novels, girls who, like her, had seen happiness die, went as instinctively to nursing as a child with a penny to the nearest candy shop.

A third thought, — this time of her mother, — came with such swiftness and poignancy that everything else was blotted out. She waved it aside,

querulous and impatient. A vision of commonplace mothers had no place in a tragic romance! But it held, — an immovable, radiant silence. Wherever her mind or her heart strove to turn, it was there in the pathway before them. And through its persistence, at last and with her high soul quite spent in the conflict, the girl knew a second and more tender defeat.

All the best in her bruised heart came out, as sweet-smelling herbs send forth fragrance in the crushing. And like them, with the hurt came the power of healing. For the first time in all of her centered and callous young life, she consciously yearned toward her mother. With the longing she knew a dull stir of regret. A thousand neglects, careless phrases, requests brushed aside for their seeming inconsequence, hurried in from the past to accuse her.

Her weeping was over. These last thoughts had steadied and calmed her. She rose from the bed, moving precisely. "This is the thing to be done with my life," she said, speaking aloud. "I can never be happy myself. That is past. But I can and I will make up to mother for what I should have been to her all of the time."

Already she knew a material incentive. She ran to the desk, drew out writing materials, and impetuously dashed off, "My dear Mother." Here she paused, nibbling the long feather on the quill. She would like to have used a more demonstrative epithet; but after a moment she shook her blond head with the thought, "No, I must go at things slowly. If I said 'dearest' now, she would know that something in me had changed."

As again she bent to the page, a current of chill air about her bare ankles reminded her that she had neither bathed nor dressed. She went through these offices perfunctorily, her mind all the while on her letter.

It proved one of many pages. She recounted their various "frolics"; enlarged, — not without consciousness of a certain martyrdom, — on Mark's many attractions; made light of the personal indisposition which, as she said, in keeping her away from the day's outing had given an opportunity for sending at last a real letter; and at the close she allowed momentary rein to her new impulse by saying, "Now I've seen this marvellous New York. I always had wished to, and would not have missed the trip for worlds. I am more grateful to Uncle Jim than I can make him believe. It sounds queer to say, but somehow, instead of losing myself in this great city, I seem for the first time to have found myself. The whole experience has been wonderful, — but, now, little mother, I want to come back to you and to Little Sunshine."

With the closing and sealing of this, which to her was the initial move in a life's dedication, and despite of her sense of deliverance, a strange, physical faintness, increasing, it seemed, with each tick of the small desk clock, became so intense that she was forced to regard it.

At the moment the clock rang out two. Lucille laughed. "What an idiot I am," she exclaimed. "No breakfast and still no lunch. No wonder I feel like a shell."

She rang for a waiter, and giving some thought to

selection, ordered a meal to her room. After eating, her energy rushed back with such force that upon its swift tide all her recent emotional pangs threatened return. She flew for her coat and hat. A long walk in the Park would be best to repel the unbearable renaissance.

As she swung to her wrist the smart shopping-bag, a new and arresting thought made her eyes bright. She would first buy her mother a present. On the pavement, where she needed to thread a jostled way to the outer half in order to join the current of southerly-moving humanity, her white brow was still knitted in perplexity as to what she should buy. It came to her now, with compunction, that never since childhood had she gone forth like this with the object of selecting an individual gift for her mother. The stereotyped Christmas and birthday ones took invariably the form of a new dish or ornament for use in the home. It was true that Ciceley desired it. There were so very few things, she averred, that she, in herself, actually needed.

But this time, said the girl to herself, answering the remembered words, "It is going to be a present for mother, and not for the house."

But what to select? Even Mark and her own blighted hopes knew eclipse. The inevitable, and usually exhilarating looks of delight, of instinctive, spontaneous admiration flashed toward her during all such walks on The Avenue, — for the true New Yorker there is but one, — and which heretofore had been culled as a child gathers flowers, bloomed through this stress and vanished, entirely unnoticed.

She turned in to the first great "Emporium." Laces, ribbons, long counters of glittering personal ornaments were swept by a negative glance. At a fluttering display of handkerchiefs, she stopped short. Handkerchiefs were proverbially acceptable. "They are no use here," she reflected, with wisdom. "If I got her the sheer hand-worked ones I certainly should, she never would keep them. In a very few days Sylvia and I would be finding them in our top bureau drawers."

It was not until her arrival at a section redolent of joss-sticks, and alluringly termed Oriental, that inspiration came. There were shawls of all sizes and colors, fringed and embroidered shawls; shawls just tossed off from the shoulders of Carmen; black shawls for huddled old age. Between these two latter extremes, she fixed on a gray one, with a sheen that recalled Cousin Julia's beautiful hair. Before leaving the counter she purchased a second, much cheaper, but making up in reverberant hues what it lacked in textile requirements. That was for Mammy, — not only a home-coming gift, but a peace-offering. With spirits and pocketbook each considerably lightened, Lucille emerged, shouldering herself into the endless chain of pedestrianism. She now chose that half of the pavement that led northward. Soon her familiar hotel entrance was passed, and from this she could make a diagonal crossing directly into the sun-steeped Park.

There was here no timepiece but the lengthening of shadows. Her swift motion, — the buoyant, rhythmic steps, — were already bringing healing.

When she came back in thought to the material present, she was quite close to the Northern Park limit. Realizing that her hotel must be miles away, she decided to return by a Fifth Avenue omnibus.

She climbed to the top of one of these lurchy and ponderous vehicles, and congratulated herself on securing a front seat. This satisfaction, however, had but a brief existence. Each forward jerk plunged them more deeply into the congestion of late afternoon traffic. They made one of a long line of cars, vans, and equipages. Their progress became a mere series of starts, followed, after a few grating inches of advance, by an irritating and gasoline-tinctured quiescence.

It was well after dark when she reached her own room. Sylvia, half dressed, and evidently nearly distracted with apprehension, rushed in to question her. With the instinct of visual foreboding, derived surely from the anxious small mother at home, she had been picturing her sister as prone in some doctor's office, or hospital. She had not alarmed Uncle Jim yet, so she said, but had waited, hoping with every moment —

"Well, you see that I'm safe," smiled Lucille. "What are our plans for the evening?"

These proved to include dinner at the Brandts' and a "first night" afterward. Because of the theater, dinner would be early, at seven. The car was to be sent at a quarter before. "I'm getting dressed now," volunteered Sylvia. "I'm going to wear my new pink one, with the wreath of pink roses. You'd better begin, too. It's late."

"It won't take me long," said Lucille, in a voice that held so little interest that her sister involuntarily looked up. "Oh, my head is entirely well," she vouchsafed to the look. "It's only that I don't feel particularly 'flossy' to-night. I'm —" she paused, and her eyes set on Sylvia's. "I am homesick!" she cried. "Aren't you?"

By this they both stood in the doorway which connected the two rooms. To the abrupt, startling question, little Sylvia at first merely gasped. Then her brown eyes began to glow. Before she could speak, Lucille, with a curt and dismissing gesture, pushed her away, and shut the door close.

Youth is nothing if not dramatic. Lucille, for this evening, instinctively dressed her new part. Her gown was of white, — filmy layers of straight-hanging net over ivory silk. The neck, low and round, and the sleeves puffed in Kate Greenaway fashion, gave her young throat and arms an appealing, almost a childish beauty. She wore neither jewels nor ornaments. Conventional, long gloves were discarded. The golden wonder of her hair had been caught by a few amber pins to a loose-hanging coil at the back of her neck. Gazing in a sort of plaintive admiration at her own lovely image, she heroically forebore the usual touch of powder upon her nose. Such vanities belonged to a phase of her life already relinquished.

After a moment of hesitation, and with a gesture that deprecated the vanity, she went to Mark's roses, selected a few perfect buds, and pinned them upon her breast. Now, indeed, she was ready. Sylvia, knock-

ing rather timidly, informed her in a whisper that the car waited. The elder girl caught up a scarf of white tulle, drawing it carelessly about head, throat, and shoulders. As she opened the door, the little one caught her breath. "Wha — what," she stammered, "is the matter with you, Lucille? You look so — so — different!" Then with a cry of delight, "But you never were prettier in all your life! When do you think Uncle Jim will let us start home?"

"To-morrow, I hope. Don't you hint of it, Sylvia, to either Uncle Jim or Mark. I want to spring it on them suddenly. Are they both in the sitting room?"

"Yes, yes," palpitated the little one. "I heard Uncle Jim letting Mark in. Are you going to speak of it now?"

Lucille nodded, then swept, a vision of snow and spring flowers, into the presence of the two men. Both were standing. In her guarded excitement she did not realize that each gave an impetuous start; or that into Mark's eyes had flashed once again the coveted echo of rapture. Her intent was just now all for Jim.

She moved straight up to him, at which he, — always vaguely disturbed in her presence, — fell back a few steps.

"Uncle Jim," said the crystalline voice, "this trip you have given us has proved the most wonderful thing in my life. I shall never, never forget all your kindness. I appreciate every minute of my stay in New York, and all of the lovely things you have bought us — but now —" her voice lowered to a musical thrill, "there's just one thing more."

"Fire ahead!" cried the Colonel, with a somewhat unsuccessful attempt at heartiness. "A new hat, or some gew-gaw, I'll bet! You could have the whole town, if my saying so would give it. Only remember that I'm a fake, not a real, millionaire."

"No millions could buy what I want — what we want," she corrected, and reached out an arm for pink Sylvia. "We are homesick," she said, with a break in the exquisite voice. "We want to go back."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE RETURN

THE three stated weeks of Jim's absence were nearing their close. For the first two, the conspirators, mother and son, left behind, plied vigorous and remediable wills without hindrance. No phase of their planning went wrong. From the weather, which continued its Indian summer tranquillity to the humblest "Jack-leg" negro carpenter engaged in nailing new boards to the fence, all elements of reconstruction moved as in magic accord. Little Sunshine, with snowy white columns, and lawns rolled to silver-green plush, appeared a fit candidate for "postcard" publicity.

But Julia had once heard a business friend say, "When there's nothing to worry you, — then, look out!" She confided to Wick her belief that it was too good to last. Nemesis surely was crouching. And then Nemesis came. In her lean, trembling hand, was a telegram.

"Sick of this hole girls want to come home start to-morrow, arriving Thursday one P.M. Jim."

Julia stood very still to watch Ciceley read. Her eyes could not leave the terse message. Apparently

she spelled out each word. Her face slowly became a surface of shifting emotions. Red crept into her cheeks. Her form, her whole poise, subtly changed. Julia, seeing it all, felt her heart sink. If a mere written wire could engender disintegration, what hope could there be of stability, when the sender — or senders — appeared?

After a long pause the engrossed one, recollecting herself with an effort, held out the paper to her cousin. Julia glanced through it. Her eyes had the stroke of an editor's blue pencil. Ciceley, with clasped hands, and happy lips parted, awaited her comment.

"Wick and I," announced Julia, with banal disregard of the expected, and folding the telegram into its former neat lines, "must start into town rather earlier than usual, this evening." (Already she had fallen back into the southern way of referring to afternoon hours as "evening.") "There are some packages from New York waiting to be called for at the express office. And didn't you have a last fitting at Madame Provost's?"

Ciceley, bewildered at first, gave a quick frown. "How can you expect me to think about dressmakers, with this?" she demanded, and, reaching up, caught back her precious telegram, holding it jealously against her breast. "Why, didn't you read? They are coming! Day after to-morrow, they'll be home. My girls — The first time in their lives — And you," she broke out, "are standing there as unconcerned as if nothing at all had happened!"

"I chance to be thinking," said Julia, her eyes, like

her voice, cool and steady, "of the things that may happen — or may not — after they come. Already your purpose is wavering. I am beginning to fear you may slump back in one minute at sight of them, to the same spineless jellyfish."

"Why, Jule — what on earth —?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean!" cried the other. "Oh, Sis, try with all your might to remember that you mustn't slump now. It's for their sakes, not yours. Be the thoroughbred I've come to believe that you are. Play the square deal with me. Keep your promises!"

"I intend to keep all of my ridiculous promises," declared Ciceley, with a good show of spirit. "Didn't I give you my word? But just now, I want to get used to the thought of their coming so soon. I haven't really caught my breath, yet. I won't go to the dressmaker. I intend to stay here by myself. You needn't try to bully me now!"

Julia went forth in search of her boy. After some desultory wandering, she traced him to what had been known for years as the old, deserted "stable." In the North or the West it would have been called a "barn." The huge, ramshackle edifice, a mere shell when Julia and Wick had essayed its restoration, stood now as an up-to-date garage. The main room had been given a curved floor of cement. It was here she found Wick, in blackened and oily condition, "going over" more for the fun than from any necessity, the machinery of their new car.

Julia without speaking leaned rather disconsolately against a long carpenter's bench.

Wick turned to her, black hands held wide to avoid self-contamination. "Well?" he enquired, with a quizzical smile. He had known on the instant that some quirk in more vital machinery had caused the unusual droop.

"A wire has just come from Jim. They will all be here Thursday, at noon!"

"Jove! That's good news! But you're not darting radium, my mother. What's wrong?"

"It's Sis. *Sis!* The darned little fool!" cried out Julia, and immediately felt great relief. "Of course," she went on, in the tone of one who finds in mere speech an assuagement, "from the first I have discounted the probability of these sentimental backslidings. The wonder is that there haven't been more. I know, in my brain, that this is probably only temporary. It's got to be, Wick! Even you don't know how I've worked on that idiot! Somehow, just now, as I studied her face while she read the wire, her fatuous, adoring expression turned me cold. She seemed to be desiccating under my eyes, — to be crumbling into sugar. A little more rapture, and she would have melted to treacle, and the need of a floor-mop. I felt like a sculptor who thinks he's been chiselling marble, and wakes up to find it soft chalk."

"Now never you mind, chum," soothed Wickford, beginning to clean off the worst dirt on a handful of waste. "Just buck up for the finish. Cousin Sis is all right. You'll find her a sport at the pinch. Let the treacle run now. There'll be less of it leaking about when the real time comes."

During the first of this sapient allocution, Julia's frown of perplexity remained. At its close, her head went up with new courage.

"I like you," she solemnly stated, her gray eyes shining with fun. "I approve of you highly. Already I am pumped full of ozone anew. Now what do you say to a spin in the car,—just the two of us. To a speed, using up our full limit, and leaving these staid country roads fringed with dead chickens?"

"Suits me!" laughed the boy. "When little Cousin Sis is along, I feel as if I straddled the neck of a tortoise. We'll both wear our speed-goggles. Go tie on your hair while I wash."

Their ride of Walpurgis lasted until nearly dark. Returned, they knew still further satisfaction in seeing that the absence had been equally beneficial at home. Ciceley declared herself—and her looks bore out the assertion,—once more serene. With Wick standing near for a witness, she went up to Julia, and said, "Don't be worried, dear Jule, for fear I am going to fail you. You have been too wonderfully good to us all. I have promised. I am going to do just exactly what we have planned."

Next day, with the arrival of Lucille's long letter, and those mysterious and somehow most suggestive words at its close, the starry-eyed mother suffered symptoms of a new "saccharine degeneration." But Wick played up nobly just here. Between them, he and Julia again set the wanderer's feet in the pathway.

On the third forenoon,—the start of the actual

day when her idols were to be restored, — Ciceley threatened to run amuck. Julia, escaping from torture, hurled herself upon Wick, demanding to be told whether or not her head had turned perfectly white.

"I can do nothing with her!" wailed Julia. "Did you ever try catching one of those small, up-and-down moths in your hands? I feel like a man in a zoo, put in charge of a new, scientifically important find, — some shy, shivering creature, that may, any time, give up its ghost. Ciceley now is demanding in frenzy the return of all her old clothes. She says they will think her a madwoman, a Mardi Gras masker gone wrong — that neither Jim nor the girls will acknowledge her."

"And how about Mark?" grinned the boy.

Julia's gesture betokened despair. "Don't joke. She's forgotten Mark lives!"

"But just think of it, Wick," she insisted, as though the fact was too loathsome to hold all alone. "Those odious, revolting old clothes! You remember how her skirts used to hang? And now she is losing her mind, — or says that she is, — because I won't give them back."

"Well," deliberated the boy, his eyes dancing, "if it's a question between restoring a few dingy rags, or having her turn to a lunatic, don't you think you had better relent?"

Julia shot him a glance meant to pierce. "For one slight objection, they happen to be at this moment adorning" (the word sizzled forth like hot vinegar) "the backs of old women in Sand Town. That is

where they belong. For another —" she stopped, not trusting her voice.

Wick, an arrow of tender remorse, flew to her. "Don't worry, you dear. I was a cad and a beast to try ragging you just at a crisis. But my own brain is doing queer things. I seem, all on top, to be lit with a sort of Alpine glow. If Cousin Ciceley's old clothes are forfeit, it is sure she's got to wear new ones. You know Cousin Sis isn't likely to start off without any! Cheer up, now, old sport," he adjured, shaking her playfully, "The worst — as they say over here — is yet to come. No, your hair isn't white. It's blue-silver, the prettiest hair in the world. Now trot back to your victim, and remember, while dolling her up, not to lose sight of the fact that I want you to look just as smart. You know I'm a regular peacock for pride when it comes to this Mother o' Mine."

Julia kissed him, and tried hard to smile. Had the arch-strategist been just a little less keenly and vitally involved, all her reading of Freud and other advanced psychologists would have found, in this duel with Ciceley, juicy meat. As it was, apprehension destroyed mental appetite. Her one thought at this juncture, was "Lord, how long?"

As the time to begin dressing neared, Ciceley reminded her more than ever of a small entrapped animal at bay. When at last convinced that her tyrant, — or, more justly, her tyrants, — for Mammy and Wick were both shamelessly adjuvant, had neglected no turn of their plot to force her into wearing the now-hateful, "absurd" recent clothes,

she wheeled from them all, white with anger, and went with firm steps to her room.

On her bed lay the pre-arranged costume, — scented, shimmering, and exquisite. Even the hat-pins and veil were in place. Almost she thought she could see Julia's deft hand hovering over them. But that hand, at the instant, began a tattoo on the door. Ciceley shut her teeth hard, and stood silent.

"Sis, Ciceley! I know you are in there. I'm coming."

The handle squeaked once, the door-panel rattled, but the rusty old bolt was in place. The figure within did not move. She felt like a totem-pole carved with shrieking, yet silent, grotesques.

"It's beyond her powers to turn into exactly the same scarecrow she was," moaned the ostracized one at the door. "She'll chuck powder and paint, as a matter of course. She may even put soap on her hair. But that gown and the hat —" here the pride of the artist gleamed wanly — "she can't mutilate them. She won't dare, since they are mine. They will save us!"

Now her own toilet needed attention. Heedful of Wick's last monition, she made her selection with care. But along with the personal motive, she was canny in choosing just those colors which would best enhance and supplement Ciceley.

"Yes, you'll do. You look quite all right, Mrs. Preston," she remarked aloud, with a final quick nod in the mirror. "But Ciceley! Oh, Ciceley! If I only felt surer of you!"

She hurried down for the comfort of being near

Wick, and encountered him sitting at ease on the gallery. The car, shining in all its length like new-polished glass, stood ready to start.

At the sound of approaching, swift feet, Wickford rose to his own. In his buttonhole glowed one small, pink rosebud. It looked strangely like Sylvia.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, his mouth spreading. "You're some girl all right! Even if Cousin Sis balks —"

"Hush! Hush!" cried the other in warning. "She is coming! Oh, Wick, shall I live through this day?"

Little Ciceley swept out. Whether paint or despair, some magician had touched both her cheeks with bright carmine. The white gloves, her gown, her smart wrap, even the slight rakish tilt of the hat, were perfection. "Good heavens!" thought Julia, and then with a grin, well concealed, of pure fun, "Sis was mad when she knocked that adorable hat over one ear!"

Wick, rejoiced as his mother, and wise for his years, made no comment. In strained silence all three moved down the steps. Ciceley reached the car first, and was assisted, perhaps with a shade too much deference, by the boy. He felt that she sent him a glance. She sat all alone in the back. The space called for five passengers. Of people her size it might hold at least nine; but Julia, hastily taking her place in the seat by the driver, felt that her cousin, plus all of her pent-up emotions, had no more room than vibrations could fill. As they sped into town, each subtly soothed and relaxed by swift motion, no

banal attempt at mere pleasantry was made. The climax was "on", and all knew it.

When in sight of the station, stung to speech, perhaps by the faint acrid smell of train smoke, Julia leaned to Wick's ear, and whispered, "I count on your help to win through. Remember, your chief charge is Sylvia. I can count on the pride of the other. You must reach Sylvia at once. Prevent her from speaking, or even looking surprise. I don't want Mark to guess, — at least, not at first. As for Jim —" This in answer to his muttered question, "Well, God's got to help us with Jim!"

The train was on time. A few moments later it came puffing in. Then, by some incomprehensible miracle, — the details of which Julia could never quite clearly recall, — the whole crisis was over. The seven had met. They were talking. And still the world rolled as it should, still the pavement lay flat, and the sun did not flicker an eyelash.

She retained, through the maze, a vague image of Wickford rushing from them, a small fluttering figure in veils held by the arm. She remembered one look on Jim's face. Something rose in her throat, and then everything blurred worse than ever. It was Lucille, smiling, calm, and unnaturally lovely, who first caught her hands, and, with the touch, dragged her back into partial composure. After this, they were all in the car. They had started toward Little Sunshine. With the chill autumn breath in her nostrils, and her boy exuding pure rapture by her side, and whispering tenderly, "Buck up, Mater mine. It's all over. It went smooth as an eel

swimming in oil! You can't show the white feather now!" the real Julia came back, chin in air.

She drew a long breath of reviving. "Yes, it did go all right," she told herself proudly. "I could hardly have hoped for such perfection. Little Sis was a wonder! The bunch is all there, just behind me, laughing and chatting as easily as if at an afternoon tea. I've got everything now as I want it. But, Oh," here the sob rose again, "Jim didn't need to be quite so good-looking in his new clothes!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DANCE OF THE LITTLE SEA-MAID

IN the pleasure-packed days that ensued, Julia was fated to meet with a complex, unforeseen, and startlingly new even to her wide experience. At its initial appearance she pooh-poohed the suggestion as ludicrous. But it hourly deepened and neared, until she was literally forced to acknowledgment. Incredible as it seemed, the menace lay in a sudden, complete introversion of what she had believed her personal attitude toward Lucille.

On the very threshold of middle-aged victory, this young girl, inexperienced and untried, her unconsciousness of what she now threatened the most potent weapon that Love could have put into her hand, this Lucille whom Julia had called the fly in the ointment, the recalcitrant cog in the wheel, through sheer splendor of courage, was making insidious encroachment upon the very foundation of motive, the Archplotter's womanly heart.

In vain, with fists clenched, Julia muttered, "She is getting no more than she richly deserves. I ought to be glad that she suffers. When I think what she's put Ciceley through! Of course I threw Mark in her

path. I did it deliberately, for I needed his help. He's been splendid! But it isn't my fault if Lucille, at first sight, went head over ears into the trap. I expected her to be more on guard. She knew very well we were duelists, and that I fought on Ciceley's behalf."

In vain she plied whip and spur to her lagging austerity. Lucille moved among them, a part of their revelry, but serene, unbetraying, impersonal as light. Her pride in her radiant mother was, apparently, as genuine as that of the little one, or of Jim. For the once misprized "Pelican," now a newly fledged Phoenix, with the last hidden fear that Lucille would "make fun of her" removed, was expanding into the colors and the perfume of youth.

The one noticeable change in the outer Lucille was her tenderness and deference to Ciceley. Julia watching, as one watches for chemical valences, could detect not a quiver of torment. The girl's defence was perfection. Out of the group, Julia alone suspected, — Julia knew! Her scars from a similar baptism of fire cried aloud. There were times when it required on her part a lacerating self-control to keep her from throwing herself at the feet of this heroine, and saying, "You have won me, you splendid patrician! I give up. You're a queen in a tumbrel, and I an old red-hatted fury, shrieking for guillotine blood. Sis isn't worth it. I am not sure even Jim is. Don't you see, don't you feel that Mark knows? He could be quite as madly in love as you are, but has held himself under tight rein because I have asked him to help. It's all to make Ciceley marry Jim."

As for Lucille, in her innermost self, from that moment down at the station, — already because of the subsequent strain it seemed to have happened ages ago, — when her eyes first encompassed a decked and rejuvenant Ciceley, the full meaning of Julia's deep-laid stratagem grew clear. It was all just a brilliantly organized scheme, centripetal to the small, helpless mother, — the mother of whom she had been, until now, openly ashamed. Ciceley was being remodelled, revived; and, in spite of her own cloying fantasies, being led, as a wondering child by the hand, to the giving and taking of happiness. For the outer processes of her client's transformation, Julia had wished a free field and no critics. Hence the trip to New York! What pleasure, advantage, or hurt she and Sylvia might get from it, were negligible by-products.

All Lucille's thoughtful reading and crude attempts at self-training, stood her now in good stead. Her pride was her one inviolable sanctuary, an arid and chill crypt indeed, with the bones of dead hopes scattered wide, but withal a retreat, a seclusion. In that underground cell she could pluck out her arrows and view them; and not even here did one moan of self-pity escape.

She, Lucille, had been used with as little compunction as one uses a broom to clear pathways for feet more beloved. Like herself, Mark Stanwood, and all that his boyish ideals might be made to subserve, was only a slip in the lottery of middle-aged hearts. For once, youth had gone to the wall.

Wick and Sylvia, having prettily spoken their lines,

were set free and, already, two unthinking, most-blissful humming-birds, had sped to a double-winged heaven of their own.

Yes, let her face it, let her crush this bitter, black grape of despair on her lips. They had used her, the once proud and disdainful Lucille. Between them they had broken her heart. To each pull of the marionette string she, like a silly, blind fool, had responded. If it snapped at the last, none would care. The two chief puppets, Jim and Ciceley, still jiggling, would soon measure their steps to the rhythm of a wedding march. With that one thing accomplished, all the rest of the automata could be flung to a dust-heap.

"And yet," here the thought came in fibers of fire and ice intermingled, "was it certain that Jim was to win?" Even Julia's omnipotence had human limits. Mark's devotion to Ciceley was obvious and intense, and Ciceley did not repulse him. In their jaunts and excursions the small group fell always into pairs. Julia led off with the Colonel. Close behind, when not actually with them, came Mark and her mother. The consciousness of being again "pretty," again loved and desired, had magically brought back to Ciceley much of the sweetness, the charm, the gentle yet gay repartee of a girlhood she had believed irrevocably foregone.

Invariably the last of the couples, and as far from the others as they dared, little Sylvia, with Wick's head bent over, smiled through their rose-colored cloud of first love.

She, Lucille, was the odd, the unmated one. Like

some rootless, exquisite water-plant, bearing blossoms that none care to cull, she drifted from one to another extraneous current of pleasure. She was welcomed, of course, with a courtesy and simulated warmth that was perhaps the bitterest fiber of all her humiliation. She was urged to remain with each pair. But smiling, with dignity untarnished, she would soon glide away to the next.

Julia, who now strove, more for her own sake than that of Lucille, not to watch her, often, in unguarded flashes of apprehension, caught her breath in a marvel at the girl's perfect poise. So young, so untried before this test in the hottest of furnaces, Lucille was achieving the seemingly impossible. She was turning, — indeed she had turned, — the substance of a flung-cloak of scorn, into ermine, her scourge, now stiff with heart's blood, to a scepter.

But as Julia alone of them knew, the girl's feet trod, each new inch, on a thorn. There were times of such torture that Lucille would think of herself as the Little Sea-Maid, dancing her dance of love's anguish, just to be near the Prince of her Dreams. "Smile, smile," she would cry to her spirit. "Don't let the others suspect. Be thankful the soul does not bleed."

In the pauses of quieter reverie, when her personal hurt was less keen, the girl found time to wonder at a phase that from the first had intrigued and perplexed her. This was the continued, and apparently genuine equanimity of "Uncle Jim." He seemed to resent not at all the young Englishman's absorption in Ciceley. He even appeared to connive with Julia in throwing them together. Then too, after the first

incredulous stare, the astonishing transformation of "Sis" had been accepted as a matter of course.

For a day or two after returning, the old friends, Jim and Ciceley, might have been caught exchanging glances of quizzical self-consciousness, looks like those which two newly-hatched butterflies, long associate as grubs, might steal each to the golden spread wings of the other. But such consciousness had been quickly absorbed into the usual.

New thoughts crowded in. The girl, sitting alone in her room, knitted her brows with the tension. Colonel Jim and his supposedly unselfish ally were strangely contented together. They had whispers, nods, and quick murmured conferences which none of the rest of the group was allowed to share. Cousin Jule, always perfectly gowned, seemed, in herself, to be undergoing a fresh recrudescence. Somewhere — some time, in the past, — it had then seemed too trivial for retention, — Lucille distinctly recalled having been told, or, more probably having overheard in a conversation of elders not meant for her ears, that from childhood Julia Wickford had cared for Jim Roy in the same hopeless way he had always loved Ciceley. The narrator, — whosoever it was, — had gone on to say that Julia's marriage to the elderly Judge Preston had been a direct outcome of despair, tempered by the grace of self-sacrifice to a derelict father.

Now, fingering each remembered passage of individual experience with Julia, as one tries the stops of a flute, she paused, vividly arrested by the image of Mrs. Preston's face, when asked so abruptly, "How has it happened that you never married again, Cousin

Julia?" She had scored there. The material point of her brief triumph had then been invisible. Now it lay in full view, as a coin or a trinket fallen in grass and long sought for, makes impish and sudden appearance.

This she held as a clue, following far. Cousin Jule neither did or said things without a full consciousness of their effect. Her most trivial and apparently spontaneous remarks had betrayed, more than once, keen forethought. Was it thinkable, possible, that any mere human creature, her youth nearly gone, her powers of intellect and will at their height, would spend time, money, and effort, or use her most intricate processes of diplomacy, all for the mere bringing together of a cousin whom she had not seen for years, who had not even taken the trouble to answer her letters, and a man with whom she was still probably in love?

"No!" moaned the girl from the depths of her own hopeless misery, "No woman alive could do that!"

If this last and most blighting solution were true, then not only Mark and herself, but Ciceley in equal degree, were mere tools for Julia's self-using. And with what marvellous, incredible cleverness she was working it out! That part of the girl's mind where intellect swung free from the personal, bowed in acknowledging a master. It was queer too, that despite what she thought was a life irrevocably shattered, she could not feel hatred against Julia. Somehow love and its chastening grief had so filled her, there was no room left for hate.

Her one throe of bitterness inhered in a sort of

fierce championship for Mark. If he really loved Ciceley with all the full strength of his passion, and was trying to make her his wife! There was only great tenderness for Ciceley. She could not yet bring herself to believe that her mother would marry a man several years younger. People did not do things like that on the Hill! But if Julia succeeded in turning Jim's heart or his fancy, might not Ciceley, reacting to such a defection, and goaded, of course, by the others, — might she not, after all —

But this proved the unbearable thought. The girl cowered, and distractedly rocked to and fro. That the only man she had loved, or ever should love, might fantastically, inconceivably become the husband of her own mother! Her mind could not admit such a horror. It seemed one of those hideous complexes about which old Greek drama is wrought.

Whether, at the drawing together of Julia's marionette curtains, tragedy or comedy would prevail, the stage setting loaned her by nature for the final act was brilliant beyond human art. Since arriving, there had been just one day of incessant, roof-pounding rain. They consoled themselves, saying, with truth, that the farmers were needing it. Jim grinned to himself. He, too, needed the rain. His oranges had been ripening fast. This generous soaking would add the last gleam to their beauty. Besides, there was always that other thing he now desired of his trees, — that magical twig for which, every day, he and Rover went searching. After this, it would surely materialize.

All day long, through the storm, the seven friends

kept indoors at Little Sunshine. Every hearth was ablaze. In the huge open grate of the drawing-room, behind andirons of brass, roared, coiled, exploded to stars and then danced, a fire of big, misshapen pine-knots like which, in the burning, there is no other such fire in the world. As Mark classically mused, "If Prometheus, poor old chap, could be sneaked out of torment to see it, he'd not care quite so much, after that, how quickly his vulture-devoured liver grew."

Wick and Sylvia, like the two happy children they were, popped corn in a long-handled wire-mesh basket held over the coals, or thrust sweet potatoes and chestnuts deep into red-gray ashes. Sylvia, the puss, as a matter of course, burned her fingers; a disaster necessitating immediate, dual flight into privacy, where Wick's kisses could be given for balm.

All at once, toward sunset, the black, basalt sky splintered into cubes. In immense drifts, as of ice-floes, the wedges of cloud drew apart, revealing a golden-red sky underneath.

Jim, cautiously deserting the group, strode out to the driveway, where he stood, feet planted at a Colossus-like distance, and began to appraise the round sky with the slow-moving eye of a weather prophet.

What he saw seemed to please; but his solitary communing with the elements was brief. The rest had missed him, and now laughingly came in pursuit. Wick and Sylvia, as usual, were "racing." It was obvious to all but the beneficiary that he allowed little Sylvia to reach the set goal.

"Uncle Jim, Uncle Jim!" she called out, while speeding, and a moment later having won, she clung for support to his arm. "It's all clearing up! There's a mocking bird starting to sing. You said you'd been waiting for rain. Won't you take us to see the oranges now?"

"What! Just before night, and my trees all beaten and sandy? Well, I rather think not!" flouted the Colonel. "But it won't be long now," he relented, in the voice of tolerance and concession peculiarly maddening to youth. "I should say, by the day after to-morrow, at latest."

"Why not to-morrow? It's nearer," suggested Wick boldly.

Julia reached them in time to hear this remark of her son. "They will be still a bit sandy all to-morrow," she threw in. "But, as Jim says, by the day after, surely —" Her words were for Wick, but the bright, meaningsmile of confederacy flashed to Jim. Lucille, now quite close, intercepted it. She had no wish to see; but these days, wherever she might turn, there was always a new thrust of pain to be fended.

From the look and her haste to avoid it, her eyes met, and by sinister magnetism were constrained to watch, a scene which her mother and Mark, oblivious of an audience, had begun to enact.

The two, loitering behind all the others, but moving, it seemed, with the purpose of ultimately joining them, had come to a definite pause. The small hostess, her sweet face uplifted, now spoke. Her words were, of course, quite inaudible. She gave a quick gesture out toward the left, where a path ran,

half-hidden in shrubbery. Side by side, they turned into the path.

Again they came to a standstill, and with a pang surely disproportionately ravaging, Lucille saw that they stooped to a small evergreen bush, upon which, even at this distance, the star of an opening flower could be seen. This was the rare, white camellia, the blossom of snow, with a chrysophrase heart which alone, out of the wide, herbal plenitude of the garden, Lucille had desired for her own.

Mark, with a nod and a gesture that asked for his companion's permission, broke the one flower short, and bowing, proffered it. His face was invisible. But Ciceley's brown eyes and quick blushes glowed out with the clearness of gems.

Now she fastened it with fingers that were apparently unsteady, to the front of her brown velvet blouse. Mark's sleek, shining head bent down lower. Whatever it was that he said, Ciceley shrank. Her two hands went out, as if warding. She made a swift, gasping response, faltered backward, then, seeing the others, came towards them in what was almost a run. Through the saturate, gold light of evening, she looked a mere girl in her teens. To Lucille, even, stung and writhing with new anguish, she was exquisite, desirable, compelling.

The sulking of clouds overhead was all ended. The sun at the rim of the world tipped his hat. A myriad birds gave salute in shrill song.

"Well," remarked Julia, with a sob in her throat, quite inexplicable, "we shall be able to dine in town as Mark's guests, after all!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE GARDEN OF HESPERIDES

SINCE his return, now two weeks past, Colonel Jim had been host at more than one "frolic." Not only this but, incited by the wonders of restoration achieved at Little Sunshine, he had put his own huge mansion, together with its surroundings, into the hands of the new firm, — Preston and Preston, House and Landscape Architects. Remodeling a Specialty.

Their sagacious, initial step had been a somewhat ruthless trimming of the live oaks that engloomed the big house. Great arcs of low-hanging limbs were cut off, the scars hidden from view by a smearing of wood-colored oakum. Next the entire vast floor of the avenue, from gateway to stately white columns, was spread with the snow of pounded shell. The improvement wrought by these changes alone bordered upon the miraculous.

The house must be painted both inside and out. This was Julia's decree. Last of all was to come the great feminine orgy of selecting new draperies, — carpets, rugs, portières, window curtains, new upholstery for the Chippendale chairs, — and a fresh store of dainty house linen. In this part of the undertaking,

Ciceley and her daughters had already announced their intention to coöperate.

Until now Colonel Jim had used money with the primitive casualness of a savage, stripping off, at his need, beads of wampum. His own wants were boyishly few. On "Sis and the girls" he had spent to the limit of generous trickery; but being by nature neither ingenious nor a hypocrite, this road had not led very far.

Now Julia, along with more vital things, was teaching him the rapture of spending. He revelled in waste like an urchin loose in a sweet-shop, dispensing largesse to his mates. New York is a mad school for squanderers. The germ had first entered him there.

No suggested extravagance could daunt him. "Get the best. Order more!" he would cry. "I am quite well aware," he said, grinning, "that I've given myself over to sharks. But I'll never call 'quits' while there's a nickel in the bank; and even if you skin me to that, I've a crop of oranges, — the biggest and best ever grown, — just yelling out dollars."

"We're eternally hearing about those oranges," challenged Mark to this statement. "We never open our mouths but you fling — metaphorically — a cartload in our faces. It's beginning to look a bit thick! Why the mystery? Why the keenness to keep us away?"

Jim smiled, — an exasperating smile of assurance. Since their return from New York, no matter how open and generous his other forms of hospitality, the

whole "bunch", as he called them, was sternly forbidden a glimpse of his oranges. He was keeping that show for the final one. Even the house windows facing that way had been barred.

The excuses wrung from him were banal. One day was too hot; another too cool. Of late, and with more show of reason, he said that the drought was holding them back. "After a good heavy rain, they'll be in perfection. Then you shall see what you *shall* see!"

The rain had obligingly come down, but not so Colonel Jim. "Pretty soon, pretty soon now," he evaded. "Perhaps by the day after to-morrow."

That night at Mark's dinner, given in a private room at the hotel, Jim announced that by way of compensation for the waiting, he had thought up a new and a typically Southern entertainment. If the assembled ones would honor him with their presences, he would give, the following evening at Stag Harbor, a regular "possum supper."

When the chorus of acceptances died down, he said, with quizzical eyes full on Ciceley, "I will give it, that is, if Sis says I may have Mammy Nycie to help."

From Ciceley's quick nod he wheeled around to Mark. "That she-nigger," he explained somewhat crudely, "together with my coon, old Snow, can fix up a platter of possum, with 'taters-in-de-gravy' that would make St. Peter at the gate let Beelzebub slip through."

This "loaning" of one or the other faithful servant had come to be part of the programme. For

the old couple themselves, it was a visible nearing of joy. Oftentimes, when working together in kitchen or pantry, the bright turbaned head and the snowy one almost touching, they would pause, their thick lips widening to the sound of "Miss Ciceley's" laughter. It had been a long toll of years since "Mammy's Baby" had laughed just like that. The antiphony of "Marse Jim's" louder mirth never failed them.

To the ears of the listeners outside both were equally star-singing music. Through the cadence each heard sounds of bells — wedding bells — a prophetic and heavenly chiming rung not alone for "de white folks." A second chime followed — humble — covert — jangling softly through trees in a valley, from the spire of the "Fust Foot-Washin' Baptist Ch'uch," down in Sand Town.

It meant for these two sure companionship down the long slope of years; the laying forever of old age's dread specter of loneliness. They could see, as through mist, the bright gleam of a hearthstone, and they two, lifelong friends, side by side in its warmth. For the summer would be the two split-bottomed chairs on the porch. Lady Bansas would tumble about it, and in their own bit of "yard" a few pet chickens would scratch and preen. They thanked God, these reverent old children, for the peace and content of their lot.

Colonel Jim's possum supper was more than successful; it was a triumph. For its creation his new traits of extravagance and secrecy were both brought into play. Apart from the eager darkies, Julia alone was admitted to the arcana of preparation.

All through the forenoon, she and Jim kept to themselves and their work. At the gate was posted a negro urchin, as sentry, with orders to give warning at the first attempt on the part of the others to intrude. (What Jim really had said was "butt in.")

That night, about six, when the guests, still grumbling and pretending high dudgeon, were ushered in, even the most spleenful small member which was Ciceley, granted amnesty.

The dining-room walls were half covered with pine branches, set thick with their brown velvet cones. Among them were limbs of the red-oak and maple, frost tinted to carmine and orange. On the table, for centerpiece, lay a round bed of moss, from which sprang laden sprays of puckered persimmons, chinquepins in a green explosion of burrs, and racemes of bloomy, purple whortle-berries.

The cloth was of coarse unbleached linen, its edges embroidered — literally sewn by needle and thread — with a striking key-pattern done in point-lapping autumn leaves. Conspicuously upon it sat the huge platter holding the possum. Sweet potatoes lay about it like petals, and to make the dish really a creation, Julia had placed, in a continuous wreath near the rim, a cirrus of scraped carrot-parings, mingled with parsley.

There were cold meats in plenty, thin broiled ham sizzingly hot, various dishes of relish, homemade spiced peaches, walnut pickles, stuffed mangoes, and gherkins.

Mammy Nycie did not appear. Her concern was creation, not dispersal; but old Snow, with the tremu-

lous awe of an acolyte, shuffled round the gustatory shrine. Every few moments he would dart again toward the pantry, summoned apparently by a mystical warning, and return, holding aloft a new and fragrant oblation of hot rolls.

When the banquet was ended, and all sat before the hickory-wood fire, Jim imparted the great news that at last his orchard was in trim to receive them. In the morning, about ten, they could come. Even yet there were minor restrictions. He insisted on meeting Mark at the car, to "hold on to his coat tails," as he said, until the entire group had gathered. No one must take a step until he, Jim, had given the signal. However others might regard it, the affair, in the eyes of the Master of Ceremonies, evidently loomed as a national event.

Next morning before the most eager of "Little Sunshiners" could have been stirring, the Colonel, already dressed and great-coated, with Rover inevitably at heel, went out in the dawn to his oranges.

A fog thick and damp as wet moss lay upon them. The trees showed symmetrical humps under a wide spreading coverlid. The pond with its island was invisibly part of a misty gray void. Behind inky pine-tops, far distant, the hampered sun strove for ascendancy. His red breath was as cold as the fog. Jim drew up his collar, emitting a loud, shuddering "B-r-r-r-r!"

At this, Rover, inspired by the sound to a similar rousing, gave one yelp and a long forward leap. The mist soaked him up, a brown splotch on an endless expanse of gray blotting-paper; but Jim fol-

lowed the dog's scampering diagonal, as if tied to a string.

Not until he reached the orchard's most distant angle of growth did he pause. Rover panting, triumphant, and now seated, welcomed him from among the boughs of a tree. The man grinned. "We know what we're after, old Sport!"

Jim moved eager, tentative hands through the foliage. The mist seemed to thin where he stood. An odor, exotic, enchanting, crept into the dense, chilly air. All at once the great sun, pushing down cowering pines to a threshold, stood erect at the portals of day. A red shaft of glory struck Jim's shoulder and gilded his outstretched hand. The white flowers that he touched blushed to rose hues. On them dew hung in tears, — happy tears. A mocking bird nesting beneath fluttered out, and in going scattered rapturous echoes and trills. Jim smiled at the bird. Pretty soon might not he, too, know rapture?

His flower, his talisman, had bloomed. Only once in a long, long while did the sporadic wonder occur, — did a full, fruit-laden tree put forth such an echo of spring in late autumn. Heretofore he had watched for them merely as exquisite fantasies. Last year there had been none at all.

But now, from some hidden, unrealized inception, Jim found himself nurturing a desire, a fond hope, that had deeped into something resembling obsession. From the hour of his recent home-coming, he and Rover had searched, tree by tree. Surely, after all the love and care he had given, they could not refuse him this boon!

Leaning, seeking, parting dark branches, with Rover as breathlessly keen as himself, Jim had come to believe in his heart, even though reason derided, that a spray of these flowers, with their age-long associations of joy, would, if blown to his hand in this crux, prove the wand of necromancy and open at last the Closed Door.

Then, in one heart-catching instant, he found it — he or Rover — he never knew which. It was hidden near the crest of a small, remote tree, a mere finger of green, crowding buds, and yet quite enough for the beckoning of hope. At dawn and at twilight Jim sought it. No child in its garden digging up seeds to find whether or not they had sprouted, no midsummer boy promised his first rifle “next Christmas,” ever watched time with more desperate eagerness than did Jim for this blooming of flowers. For this, he had kept friends at bay. Because of it, and its interminable tardiness, agents were mumbling anathema, and the still empty orange-crates, heaped into tottering, pyramids, threatened collapse.

The Colonel was obdurate. “Let the darned robbers wait,” he said, scowling. “Yes, I know that I promised delivery, and the time’s overdue, — but what of it! I reckon the oranges are mine while I’ve got them.”

But now after rain and the warm sun-steeped day that followed, all reason for waiting was ended. There was never more perfect a spray. The few wide-opened florets were marvels of ivory and gold. Great, rounded white buds, tapering thickly to smaller ones, drooped like the lids of a girl.

Jim, after a long, smiling, ecstatic survey, and one parting sniff of delight, turned and strode back to the house. It was still very early. Uncle Snow was just making the fires, but Jim went to the telephone, demanded Mark's hotel, and in tones that made the drowsy night-clerk first blink, and then giggle, ordered immediate connection with Mark.

For a moment, — it seemed to Jim hours, — no response could be gained. "Keep on ringin'! Bust the wires. Yes, I know he's in bed; what I want is to get him out of it. Don't give up. You can put all the blame on Jim Roy."

Then came the Englishman's voice — "What the dev—! Oh, it's you, Colonel Jim! Are you there! You're a bally old bird to do this to a chap close on midnight!"

"Oh, shut up. You're to catch the eight-thirty car to the Hill. The whole bunch is to meet early at Little Sunshine. Don't you fail, or I'll skin you alive!"

"Skin on and be d——," Mark began, but the Colonel, chuckling hugely, rang off.

It was barely nine when the two men, Mark still "peevd", as the Colonel termed it, and protesting against being hauled from his bed before dawn, neared the gate where the stirrup latch rested.

Just without, by a common instinct, they paused and stood looking over the lawn to the sunlit old home. A light frost, too delicate even to taint the pure petals of camellias, was beginning to trickle into gems. The air smelled of chilled violets. Mocking birds and the flashing of cardinals showed in the hedges.

"Outside of England," said Mark in a low voice, and as if speaking in part to himself, "there are no homes with just the repose, the serenity, of these old Southern ones. It looks like a dream set in crystal."

Jim vouchsafed a pleased grunt. "And here goes a big crack in the dream," said he, lifting the stirrup latch high.

At the percussion, five figures appeared on the gallery. Laughing gestures were given, and when the two drew nearer, gay queries and exclamations. "Isn't the morning too lovely! We've been up and dressed since daybreak. We're ready to start at a word."

Jim maintaining his warrant of despotism, shouted orders to stop where they were. In a glimpse he had noted that Ciceley was dressed all in black. This was not to his fancy and he intended to ask her to change it. This was his Great Day, — great at least in luminous possibilities. Fate might cut him down at the last, but until then he would move as a conqueror.

"Say, Sis," he began, drawing her aside and essaying finesse in the asking, "you look mighty sweet, and I know that is one of your new dresses you're wearing —"

"It is!" put in Ciceley. "My latest, and I tell Julia that I simply cannot and will not afford another. But I love this; just look at the braiding, and the shiny big buttons, and the wonderful set of the skirt!"

Jim laughed out for joy. That "Sis Pelican", in so short a time, should be actually defending with vehemence an attack on the cut of her feathers! It was all part of hope and renascence.

"Yes, I can see it's the thing," he assured her. He tried to speak soberly, but his eyes, crinkling, darted blue lights. "You're as smart as a little new pin. It's the color I kick at. You've worn black so long, and I hate it. Now to-day — Won't you humor old Jim 'cause he asks it, and put on — well — that chipmunky brown one you wore when you met us at the station?"

"Why, of course, if you want it so much — funny boy! Wait here. It won't take me a minute."

Wick and Sylvia now raced to the garage and emerged seated in their two usual places at the front of the car. Their coming was announced by a series of yelps, wheezes, and shrieks on the "siren", that immediately threw Rover into frenzy. It had been another of Jim's conditions that, instead of walking the short distance, they should drive to his orchard in state. The two happy, giggling creatures now rending the sky with their fooling were taking this way of informing him that their part was being done well.

Jim rushed forward to check them, and to save, if not already too late, the few molecules of intelligence still left to his prostrated dog. Julia slipped back into the house to help Ciceley. Lucille and Mark Stanwood on the gallery were left, for a moment, alone.

"One would think," said the girl, smiling up at him, "from this uproar and dear Uncle Jim's perturbation that we were going to be led to the original, authentic Gardens of Hesperides."

"Who knows," rejoined Mark thoughtfully, his gaze on the lawn. "Who ever can tell?"

Ciceley came running down-stairs. Her high heels beat a tattoo of excitement. The skirt of brown velvet edged with fur swirled and clung and swept out from her trim silken ankles. Her slippers were of bronze, with huge, gold-bronze buckles. The short jacket, fur bordered, hung in straight lines to her hips. The collar went high, and into the fur of it her chin nestled. It had the look of a delicate, warm fruit. On her head was a cap of brown velvet, edged and pomponed with fur.

All the soft browns and tans, with their gleamings of yellow, blent to tones which Jim rightly called "chipmunky." At sight of her one thought instinctively of soft furry things bred in copses, — of the mottling of fawns, the stripings of newly fledged partridges, of butterflies, golden and brown.

She went up directly to Jim. They looked long in each other's eyes.

"All you need, Little Sis," said the man, "is a chinquepin necklace and cross."

Ciceley's lids fluttered down. "And the chinquepins are getting ripe fast."

Now they started. Uncle Snow, on watch at the Stag Harbor entrance gate, saluted with pomp as they passed. In the great rioting hedge which had shut out the view of Jim's oranges, a hedge running parallel to the live oak avenue but at quite a distance toward the east, there had always been an arch cut through the foliage and known by the darkies as "de white folks' do'h." For the past two weeks it had been concealed by the pile of brushwood and evergreen. This morning the orifice showed clear.

While yet some yards from it, Jim ordered the chauffeur to halt. "You're to go through it one by one," stated he; "I'll lead you in person, and I want each man-Jack to shut his eyes tight and keep 'em that way, till you're all side by side facing the orchard, and I tell you to look."

There was no use opposing the overlord. Authority flashed from his eyes, and fulminated in his voice. By this time the small conclave was a group, not of rational adults, but of nudging and giggling school-children. "Now play fair!" threatened Jim, as he led through the enfilade. Just beyond he ranged them in line, elbows touching. They were almost hysterical now, feeling themselves to be idiots, delighting in such merry fooling, with lips parted wide, and eyelids obediently screwed down to mere slits, until Jim boomed the word of release.

The first to find utterance was Mark. "Oh, my eye!" moaned that gallant young guardsman, erstwhile a pet jewel of courts. "Now I'm utterly sure that I'm dippy."

"Take heart, man!" cheered Jim, who by now evinced symptoms of explosion. "Step right out. Don't be scared. Seeing's believing, you know, but feeling's stark truth. Pick 'em — peel — eat — bust 'em wide open — make sure they are there."

Mark, pretending a rope-walker's caution, advanced to the golden-flung gage. The others, to whom the orchard was no such revelation, at first spurned the sight, watching him.

About five acres of clearing, a place where Mark, as a boy, had often dodged among giant pine trees,

stretched now in a huge tilted basin, slightly concave. The earth, which used to be russet with pine straw, shone white with a sparkle like sea sand. On its dazzling expanse there were set, line on line, what appeared to be mammoth green baskets, brimmed and foaming with golden globules. In the center of all gleamed the pond, a lagoon of pure sapphire, held in by an atol of gold. Mark's delight and appreciation satisfied even Colonel Jim.

"And now," said the autocrat boldly, though his throat as he spoke seemed to close, "if the rest of you-all don't object, I've a special small tree over there by the lake," — he pointed, and Julia smiled softly to note that the big hand was steady, — "that I first want to show just to Sis."

There were two starts of instinctive surprise. One came from Ciceley, the other, instantaneously checked, from Lucille. A palsying silence ensued, that sort of a social hiatus where each gasps in a wordless vacuum, where every one travails for speech, only to throw on the brakes, in terror of verbal collision.

Lucille gazed in impersonal absorption at the sky. Sylvia's eyes went to Wickford and stayed there. Mark, Julia, and Jim alike struggled nobly to see nothing at all.

The small figure in brown plainly faltered. Her wide-opened, brown eyes went to each face in turn. With each instant, they seemed to grow wider. Julia, leaning close, touched her. "Go, Ciceley, go with Jim."

As her mother obeyed, the tall girl moved uncertainly toward Julia. One hand was outspread as

if groping her way through a blinding radiance. Julia drew the girl's face to her own. Their cheeks quivered close for an instant and in parting disclosed the shimmer of tears.

Through the sunshine Jim's great shoulders swung ahead. Rover trotted sedately at heel. Ciceley's feet, more than once, seemed to stumble, at which Jim turned. "Am I walking too fast for you, Sis?"

Julia, rousing herself with an effort, asked, "Shall we go back to the house?" They defiled through the hedge, silent, speechless, a passage of low-breathing shadows.

On reaching the avenue, Wick suddenly sprang into life. "Come on, Sylvia. I'll race you as far as the gate for a big box of sweets!" The abandoned ones, still strangely silent, kept meticulous tread toward the house.

With a hand on the gold of his tree, Jim's tramp ended. His companion gave one questioning glance. The look, swift and demure, had been quite enough to assure her that to no seasonable exhibit of fruit had she been led. It was autumn indeed, and the harvest, but here on Jim's special, small tree had grown something that whispered of springtime and joy. Its perfume flowed out in a rapture. She lifted one hand, touched the flowers, and then eyes and hand suddenly fell.

Though she tried, she could not force her eyes to a meeting. She felt that he gazed down upon her, his soul in his own. The intent of his planning had caught her. She knew why he had wanted "just Sis." That ridiculous old promise was broken, and

he had taken this tender and beautiful way of surrender. How lover-like — thoughtful — romantic! Dear old Jim! Dear, faithful retainer! Well, at last she could give all he craved!

Her lids were down-freighted with gladness, the gladness that giving can bring. Her cheeks flew bright banners of scarlet. Now both hands fluttered up to the blossoms. Without breaking it, she bent the lithe spray to a coronet of ivory, topaz, and pearl, and held it in place, — held it there in the sunlight before him, and the blood in her veins ran in fire.

Wave after wave of exquisite shyness assailed her. And then, out of nowhere, a menace. Why, why was the man standing silent? Was he never to speak, — never stir? Rover whimpered and crept into shadow. Then out of the dark came Jim's voice, quiet, determined. "Even that's not enough, Little Sis."

For an instant she found herself reeling. The spray, like a whiplash, sprang back into place. With clenched fists she drew herself upright. "I'm afraid that I don't understand."

"But you will; but you must, Little Ciceley. You must make me be sure once for all. You remember that promise I made us?"

Through lips gray as ashes she repeated more clearly, "I do not understand."

Jim shook his bared head in the sunlight. "I am sure that you do, Little Sis."

"Do you mean?" she cried now, half-incredulous, "that you brought me out here — that you dared bring me way off out here just with you and these flowers" — here she gave them a fleck of disdain,

"in the hope, with the definite intention, of forcing me to — to —" The sentence snapped short. Those were words that her voice could not carry.

Jim, in silence, replaced his felt hat.

With a low, stifled cry, she went past him. Anger, scorn, outraged dignity burned in her eyes. At her look the man's heart stopped its beating. He stood like a thing carved in stone.

A few feet away Ciceley hesitated. Then she paused, her face still turned away. She seemed to be fighting an impulse. Jim gritted his teeth and said "God!"

Now the pink chin turned slightly toward him. "So you thought," she flung over her shoulder, "that in this way you'd even old scores! You had dared to believe you could make me, make *me*, Ciceley Taliaferro, get down on my knees at your feet! You, the man I had thought such a gentleman, to descend to an insult like this. Well, I won't — never — never! Not to save you from death. You should have known me and yourself better, Mister Jim Roy."

She moved round by a few inches more to observe him. Jim this time did not brave the brown eyes. He stared down at the earth, hopeless, beaten, and offered no word of defence.

At such moments of passion nothing flays like persistence in silence. A new swirl of wrath caught her up bodily, flung her round, and deposited her facing him.

"There's just one thing more, Mr. Roy, and I'll leave you. Perhaps you'll have enough decency,

enough manliness, to assure me that if I had — had —” Again she choked on the words.

Jim looked up. His voice sounded weary. “Are you trying to get me to say whether, if you had been the thoroughbred I thought you, my answer would have been ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“You’re a monster! But tell me, Jim, tell me. I must know so much, or I can’t live. Oh, surely it was not all for my punishment, for only this hideous humiliation! You could not hate a *leper* like that!”

Jim writhed and groaned as under thumbscrews. Ciceley’s smile, winning, pleading, flashed light. She hastened to reach him. One cajoling small hand touched his sleeve. The man felt himself vanquished, then, with one supreme effort, more demoniac than human, laid hold of his struggling purpose and compelled it to bend to his will.

“It won’t work, Sis. This isn’t a game we are playing. It means for me a break-up of everything now existing. I am going to sell my plantation. I’ll give your girls all that I’ve made, if you’ll let me. God knows the stuff’s useless to me. I’m no quitter of life. I shall do nothing desperate or cowardly, but I’m going to clear out from the Hill! That’s about all, I believe. Come. It’s time we went back to the others.”

He turned and had started when she, with the cry of a child in the night suddenly waking, called “Jim! Oh, dear Jim!”

“Yes?” said he, stoically.

“Just a minute. The flowers, the orange-spray. You said you had kept them for me.”

For answer he drew out his pocket-knife. "Wait — wait," she implored, catching the hand that opened it. "Give me — give me just — just — Oh!" she sobbed, "I *do* want to. But I can't. I just can't. I do not know how!"

Jim sent the knife spinning. He stooped and took into his own her small, icy hands.

"Don't you see, Sis," he reasoned. "Can't you understand what this test means to me? All my life long I have cared for you — have tried hard to win you. Ghosts and phantoms have kept you away. They are gone now, because Julia came back to rout them. I know they are gone. I believe that you, too — But I swore to you, God, and myself, that my last chunk of dirt had been swallowed. If this wonder of happiness is true, and you care for me, even a little, don't you see," here the low voice fell ragged, "that you should not be willing, you of yourself shouldn't want me to eat any more?"

"And you shan't!" she broke in, with a voice that felled the last shadow. Before he could suspect her intention, she was down on her knees, and a pink palmfull of sand was on its way to her lips.

He caught it and scattered it far. "Not for you either, you, my one love," said he brokenly. "Oh, Sis. Oh my little brown butterfly, have I won you at last?"

"Yes," murmured Ciceley, as well as she could from her ambush, "that is, if you're sure that you're willing to marry me, Mister James Roy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE FUTURE, — THROUGH A HOLLY WREATH

THE wedding took place on Christmas morning, at Little Sunshine. Immediately after the ceremony, and on the same spot, with the same smiling and furtively teary assemblage looking on, Mammy Nycie and old Uncle Snow joined their black, toil-worn hands for the rest of life's pilgrimage together.

The two bridal parties adjourned directly to Stag Harbor. The splendid old mansion had, of itself, the look of a bride. The high, fluted columns, white now as linen newly bleached, were festooned and twined in wild smilax, interwoven with berries in clusters of coral red. From the open door down to the last gallery step and beyond it ran a strip of crimson carpeting, its borders concealed by holly and smilax.

On the top step, like Midas-touched flunkies, stood two orange trees in a tumult of fruiting. These had been withheld from the general harvesting and transplanted into mammoth green tubs.

In the house the enormous half-circular ballroom, embellished with flowers and evergreens, was in use as a central refectory. On tables, sideboards, and buffets, stood all manner of savory roast meats, fowl,

ducks, pigs, ham, spiced beef, and the delectable wild turkey.

Not content with the prodigal outlay, Julia had managed to secure, through the hands of the genii who served her, the *pièce de résistance* of a genuine boar's head. For its cooking a special brick oven had needed to be built. Encrusted, brown, gaunt, it sprang from its platter of parsley, and its eyes, now two radishes cut to show centers of white, glared a dreadful defiance on all who dared to approach. Ciceley, seeing it, shuddered. "Why," she whispered to Jim, clinging close, her startled face averted, "I would just as soon try to eat the head of John the Baptist!"

In an alcove which Jim and his confreres quite shamelessly frequented, could be found various Brobdingnagian vessels conserving eggnog, apple toddy, claret cup, sherry cobbler, and mulled port for the ladies. More than one heirloom punch bowl, extracted from dust-covered corners, had been proffered for use.

It was truly an all-day, and far-into-the-evening, symposium. The entire Hill, white and black, had been bidden. By midnight, with the stopping of tramcars, and the long string of motors in waiting, it would seem that quite half of the town had come, also.

Mrs. Rogers grew alarmingly giddy, even essaying some moth-eaten jokes. The three Misses Turrentine, three timid, starched figures, contributively arrayed by the kind-hearted Hill, exchanged awe-stricken whispers behind sandal-wood and turkey-

tail fans. It was Yuletide, said they, as they always had dreamed of the revel. It was wassail, as their own sturdy ancestors had known it. In the midst of rejoicing they grew sad, these wan souls, in thinking of long vanished splendors.

But the Big House, rocked and vibrant as it was with the ring and the echoes of laughter, showed but part of celebration. At the edge of the orchard stood the packing shed, a low, cheaply constructed building, as long as the drive of a bowling alley. Having served its annual purpose, it was given, without question or restriction, into the hands of Uncle Snow. The rough walls now gloomed behind banners of red and white cheesecloth. Some poetic and overwrought assistant had to this pasted huge tinsel stars. Holly, mistletoe, cedar, and smilax hid securely the crude wooden ceiling. A continuous table, with benches, ran almost the length of the floor. At one end sat "de bride's cake", vast and white, with a pagoda-like structure surmounting it, and crowned at a neck-breaking angle by a filagree cupola, in which stood two figures, a miniature bride and her groom. At the other end a similar achievement, on the apex of which fluttered a naked pink Cupid, denoted the place of "de bridegroom." These marvellous structures, one concealing a white cake, the other a black, rich with raisins and sherry, had been gifts from Ciceley and Jim.

Not all at once was a knife to assail them. The main banquet was yet to be served. Not so far away that the exquisite aromas could not rush in to tantalize and spur, in glowing earthen trenches, where for

three days oak and hickory had steadily crackled, now roasted, writhed, dripped, sputtered, and hissed such a barbecue as the world had not previously seen. To the viands acceptable to "white folks" had been added a family of possums. Surely if Hymen possessed even rudimentary nostrils, he would flee from Olympus for this.

Mark did not remain for the wedding. His leave of absence had expired, and there were certain business necessities calling. His true reason, he said to them mournfully, essaying glances of haggard reproach first to Jim then to Ciceley, "was that after the anguish already received at their hands, it was quite, don't you know, quite beyond a chap's powers of endurance."

"When I reflect," mused the Honorable Mark, in a tone of most bitter resentment, "that that same perjured woman might have had me!"

As if in the final abyss of dejection, Mark bowed his sleek head. But in spite of such melancholy discourses, his demeanor was far from being that of a heartbroken man.

At the station where, still protesting and reluctant to lose him, the six gathered to bid him "God-speed", his last clasp of the hand was for Lucille. The others, with bright, interchanged glances, moved away. But for the passing and repassing of shadowy strangers, the two were alone.

The man, without speaking, stared down to a face waxen white and more beautiful than moonlight on mist. Her eyes lifted to his.

"When the harvest is with you again—if I come—" he asked slowly, "will you walk in the Garden of Hesperides? I had hoped—I have dared to believe that earth's most exquisite flower might be blooming there, just for me."

The girl kept his look without shrinking. All her latent nobility, her fineness grown deeper through suffering, rose through her soul. The cloak of false pride slipped away, and forever.

"Into that garden, Mark, or into the Valley of Shadows. Either would be golden if you wanted me there."

Being English, with others about them, he neither kissed nor embraced her. For an instant his hand closed on hers till the pressure, had she felt it at all, might have been physical agony. "Oh, my darling—my dear," said he raggedly, and was gone.

Julia, her son, and the two Dering girls remained on at Little Sunshine. One day early in summer, without warning, the Executive calmly announced her intention of going for "a little run over to England."

"Why!" gasped Ciceley, — she and Jim chanced to be present, — "You talk like it was no more than stepping up to the Hill post-office!"

"And no more it is, when you're used to it," sparkled Julia. More seriously she bent to explain that the firm of Preston and Preston were in need of certain wall papers and a few "Adam" accessories which even New York had been unable to supply.

"I've had samples sent," complained Julia, "till my brain has become a crazy quilt. We must have

them to finish that Belden remodelling. Of course Wick can't leave too," she flung, laughing, to a half-smothered cry from the Posy. "He must stay on the job till it's finished. The only objection to the trip I can see," — here she paused, and at her bright quizzical expression, each listener grew tense and alert. "You girls can't live on here with Wickford. Sis and I should have to divide you troublesome young creatures between us. Now, Jim," she cried to that smiling and most blissful person, "you and Mrs. James Roy have had a full six months of honeymoon. In spite of your doting conviction that you're still a week-old bridegroom, you ought to be willing to shelter two babes in the woods."

"Well, rather!" grinned Jim, and Ciceley fervently echoed, "Oh, can we have the two darlings? How lovely! But my big girl, Lucille?"

"Yes, of course," sighed Julia, as if burdened. "We must find a place for tethering the future Mrs. Stanwood. Engaged girls are a nuisance. Now my plan — of course the future Mrs. Mark may not be willing — is to ask her to come al—"

The sentence was strangled to gurgles. Lucille, forgetting her dignities in as madcap a whirl as had ever spun Sylvia, was prone in her cousin's arms. "Oh, you seraph — you angel! How is it that always you think of things so perfectly beautiful and wonderful we don't dare to think them ourselves?"

They returned in October, Mark with them. By now he was in acute stages of love's madness. He would not wait for harvests, nor Christmas, nor even the finishing of a trousseau. "I want her right now,"

he declared and maintained, in the face of all feminine objection. "When I see Colonel Jim, with a mug like the sun at noon, ramping around in that two-year-old fashion, I want my dip in the fountain of youth, too. Dash it all, can't you see that I'm dying without her! Yes, I'll bring her back soon."

This to the pleading and quivering-lipped Ciceley. "I fancy that neither of us can be kept from the Hill very long. And Jim's going to bring you to England next summer. But I warn you, I'm going to marry her now, in a week at the longest. She's willing, God bless her! — the good sort she is! And if any of you kill-joys try to prevent us —!"

Consent being thus wrested, Mark, keyed to excitement already, his voice and his eyes full of light, turned suddenly to Wickford and Sylvia, demanding, "And when are these juvenile nuptials to take place?"

Sylvia squealed and fled in a panic. Wick followed as inevitably as the tail to a kite.

"Not yet — not quite yet," answered Julia, when the two best-beloved, scampering figures had rounded the end of a hedge. "She's our littlest girl — our one baby. Sis and I are not willing to give her up altogether, not even to Wickford. And then, you, bold robber, are stealing Lucille. The young birds have plenty of time for their happiness. We allow them to twitter of nesting. Wick and Sylvia work every evening together on the plans of a lamb of a cottage to be built on the old Wickford lot." Now her eyes were on Mark's, straight and shining. "Once on a time, long ago," she said softly, her voice taking

the croon and the rhythm of a fairy tale, "there lived on that spot a queer little girl called Julia Wickford. Isn't it sweet?"

"Yes, it's sweet," Mark made answer, and held Lucille very close at his side. "But you, dearest lady. The unselfish one — the giver of good gifts to others — what of you?"

"Yes, dear Jule — dear, dear Cousin Julia," came in low breaths.

Julia looked slowly from one loving face to another. "Don't be sorry for me," she cried bravely. "If it's true — and I know that in some part it is true — that I've helped you all win in the quest of the heart's desire, don't you see that each tiny fiber of your happiness is part of my being? I have mothered the brood of fledgling dreams-that-came-true. Now, if you're asking for plain facts, not rhapsodies — well, they're all worked out, too. Jim and Sis have given me outright, have made me accept for my lifetime — this dear place, Little Sunshine, which I have always loved. It's to be my own haven, my sanctuary. All my trivial, precious possessions I shall bring here. My books, papers, typewriter, sewing-machine, my big copper preserving kettle — all the material *me!* I shall work out in Ciceley's garden — know the wind and the rain and the sun — know the joy, as the old Chinese poet has phrased it, of 'seeing all things fall due in their season.' Through the yellow jessamine hedge one more gate, a wee, fringy gate shall be cut. Soon its call shall be answered, on the opposite side of the road, by another — in Wickford's new fence. I shall never be lonely — not here

on the Hill, with so many dear, precious friends to love me —”

“Love you! Well, they had better!” roared Jim, in this way barely escaping the horror of bursting into tears. “If I find a man-jack in the bunch who doesn’t love you, who wouldn’t lie down on his back and let you wipe your shoes on his face if you wanted to — why — why,” here he glowered the threat of impartial annihilation, “I’d skin’em alive with my own hands, and sing Hallelujah while skinnin’ ’em! Love the finest, best woman God ever sent down to this earth — well, they’d better, that’s all!”

Julia, a little tremulous with the laughter that followed this chivalric outburst, said once more, very gently, “And the best of it all is just this — I can never be lonely. Sis will come to me, perhaps every day. Jim will never be far. Little Sylvia and my dear boy will be living scarcely a stone’s throw away. And then, as the soft years brush past us, new feet will stray into my paths — little feet — stealing in, just to find me. Then more years. Sis and I shall be getting to be white-haired old ladies. But the bringers of new life are here. Little hands — our own hands — it may be, folded just now in a golden Nirvana — will stretch down — reaching — reaching — to touch the old stirrup latch. It will be sweet — very sweet — here in my garden, ‘when the eve is cool.’”

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